



# Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): An Evolution in Revolution

2012

## **ABSTRACT**

The topic of language pedagogy has generated excitement and interest among language researchers for many years. Again and again the discussion returns to the question of how to deliver language content to students so that they can learn a language effectively. Despite the numerous trends in language teaching, most attention has increasingly been given to an approach called ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ (CLT). As a new paradigm of pedagogy which centres on communication-based classroom activities, CLT has emerged in response to an earlier focus on grammatical forms. This article is an attempt to briefly describe the beginnings of CLT and its developments, and to discuss different ideas surrounding CLT tenets and practice. In essence, this paper does not treat CLT as a superior western product but rather as an international phenomenon which attends to the needs of language learners in a variety of learning contexts.

**Key words:** Communicative Language Teaching, approach, pedagogy, competence.

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### **Introduction**

Recent decades have seen significant changes in the in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. The use of textbooks, media, internet, and alternative kinds of language study has made English classes more productive than they were a few decades ago. Along with these changes, the teacher's role and chosen methodology plays an important part in developing learners' language competence. As noted by Larsen-Freeman (2000), improvement in teaching grows from teachers who are willing to explore new approaches (p. 83). In the past, teaching methodology was mainly concerned with grammar and translation in which teachers talked most of the time. Today, students are encouraged to talk more than their teachers. In the simplest terms, teachers used to be preachers; now they are good listeners too.

While historical literature refers to the existence of a growing number of controversies in the methods and approaches to language pedagogy, it is well-known fact that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become the most frequently discussed approach. Many language scholars have emphasized the importance of communicative approach and attempted to investigate how communication is best taught (Higgs & Clifford, 1982; as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 266).

This paper will consider a number of explanations for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Taking the origin of CLT as a point of departure, the paper reviews the literature on CLT characteristics, and proceeds to present an overview of CLT strengths and limitations before finally discussing some points about CLT adoption and practice from different perspectives.

## **Origin of CLT**

In trying to answer ‘What is CLT?’, it is natural to look at the relationship between language and communication. CLT is the term commonly used in the pedagogical literature to describe an approach which aims to implement the theory of communicative competence by incorporating the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121). Generally, when people think about CLT, images come to mind of teachers who conduct classroom activities which focus on students’ real communication to support the language learning process.

Furthermore, the discussion of CLT origin would not be complete without reviewing Hymes’ theory. Hymes (1971), a sociolinguist, showed great enthusiasm for communication-related matters. As an extension of Chomsky’s ideas (1965), one of his important works was concerned with language competence in which he maintained that effective communication could not take place unless a person possessed communicative competence in addition to his/her linguistic competence (as cited in Nazari, 2007, p. 202).

Following Hymes’ conception, many statements have been made by other experts to support his ideas about communicative competence. Wilkins (1976), for example, maintains that language competence is attributed to a set of linguistic functions which enables students to express their meaning in daily conversations, such as the ability to make an appointment, invite people to a party, or cancel a meeting. Relatedly, Widdowson (1978) asserts that the knowledge of linguistic rules is not a guarantee that a person is capable of using the language (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121).

The concept of communicative competence was then developed by Canale and Swain (1980) who maintained that communicative competence consisted of

grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence has to do with a structured comprehensible utterance which includes grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. Sociolinguistic competence deals with how people use cultural codes in appropriate ways, such as saying greetings in formal or informal ways. While discourse competence refers to the ability of using cohesion and coherence in different texts, strategic competence helps learners to improve their communication effectiveness and cope with language difficulty (as cited in Beale, 2002, p. 12).

In support of the view that the goal of teaching language is to enable students to communicate in the target language, CLT theory suggests that language learning is likely to occur when classroom activities are made real and meaningful to learners. Language theorists repeatedly mention the importance of language learning to be premised upon genuine communication rather than merely on learning the grammar of a language. They argue that while students are well-taught in making grammatical sentences in the classroom, they are unlikely to be able to use them effectively in the real situations. Thus, in order to use the language effectively, learners need to develop communicative competence (Hiep, 2007, pp. 193-194).

### **CLT characteristics**

At various times, CLT has been defined by many experts in different ways. Despite the fact that it is hard to find a universal definition of CLT, Brown (2000, p. 266) suggests that CLT definitions share four major components about communicative competence, meaningful communication, fluency, and spontaneity.

The above CLT tenets represent both gradual and radical changes from previous approaches. While the grammar translation approach was popular with language pedagogues over the previous centuries, CLT practitioners move the focus

of language teaching away from rules. In CLT, semantics (meaning in real-life contexts) is emphasized in preference to grammar and students are exposed to the use of authentic language to improve their fluency. Furthermore, CLT students are taught to speak naturally. In other words, they are not expected to rehearse what they will say for an oral presentation.

According to Johnson and Morrow (1981), CLT is built on a communication-basis. Learners use the target language through games, role plays, and other communicative activities. The writers point out that a real communicative activity is comprised of three characteristics: information gap, choice, and feedback. Information gap happens when there is an exchange between two persons of unknown information. If, for example, John asks Mary about the due date of their assignment when they both actually know when it is due, then they are not engaged in a communicative activity. Choice characterises a communicative activity in terms of the speaker's freedom to choose what and how he/she will say. Real communication does not exist when teachers provide students with fixed answers and patterns in their oral activities. In the same way, an exchange is not considered communicative when the listener does not give answers to the speaker's questions. Feedbacks or responses indicate meaningful communication between the speaker and the listener (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 129).

In addition, Savignon (2002) puts forward five elements of communicative curriculum which accord with the theoretical tenets of CLT. They include language arts, theatre arts, personal English language use, language for a purpose, and beyond the classroom. While 'language arts' refers to exercises that teachers usually use to emphasize formal accuracy, 'theatre arts' includes speaking techniques that students need to convey meaning. The last three elements aim to increase an individual's

confidence in using the language for real communication goals outside the classroom. Savignon goes on to explain that while communicative activities are essential in enhancing learners' communicative competence in the target language, the use of grammar should also be taken into consideration (as cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 194).

The significance of implementing communicative classroom activities is also supported by some other scholars. While Nunan (1989) notes that the use of authentic task-based materials and oral activities helps learners to develop their communicative competence, Brown (1994) suggests that a communicative classroom should include pair and group work in addition to the use of authentic language and meaningful communication (as cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 195).

However, Brown (2000, p. 266) argues that communicative language teaching is best understood as an approach, rather than a method. Thus, in spite of the fact that CLT tenets are well-understood and recognised at the level of language teaching theory, there is much room for differences of opinion at the level of implementation.

### **CLT in practice**

As seen above, CLT is a uniform but broad theory about the nature of language pedagogy. As an approach, CLT allows more interpretation to exist than most methods do in terms of classroom practice. Consequently, CLT practices may vary from one classroom to another depending on the contextual design and procedure.

In countries where the mother tongue is English, the English language classroom has to do with the teaching English to immigrants or foreign nationals who are notably non-native speakers of English. For these people, the purpose of learning English is to be able to interact with the local native speakers so that they can manage

their life properly in the future. In this case, CLT is taught to learners by immersing them in local culture and people. This is consistent with Holliday's concept (1994) about 'the optimum interactional parameters'. This theory holds that learners can best improve their language skills when they are constantly exposed to genuine and meaningful communication in the target language (as cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 195).

In non-English speaking countries, language teachers might encounter problems in implementing the Anglo-Saxon concepts of CLT due to the socio-cultural and political differences. This condition is well-illustrated by Hiep (2007, p. 196). This Vietnamese linguist argues that as English is spoken as a foreign language in Vietnam, English language students feel that there is no urgent need for speaking English outside the classroom. It is, thus, questionable whether the use of authentic language in the classroom could be considered as genuine communication. In this case, task-based activities which are basically meant to expose learners to the real world might not work. Moreover, the large class size in Vietnam is also a hindrance to the implementation of pair and group work. Thus, what is authentic in London might not be authentic in Vietnam (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; as cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 196).

Along this line, prior studies (Pennycook, 1989; Holliday, 1994) suggest that the definition of effective language teaching is culturally built within a certain educational setting. These experts argue that what is seen as an effective approach in one country might not be effective in another country (as cited in Hiep, 2007, p. 196).

### **Strengths and limitations of CLT**

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the learning and teaching of English are increasing in every corner of the world as the English language goes international.



The twentieth century has reflected a number of pedagogical methods and approaches. Among the five major language teaching methods and approaches (grammar-translation, direct, structural, situational, and communicative), CLT is of special interest. While some writers see it as more progressive than others, it is debatable whether it always works across contexts.

Some supporters of CLT support a view which Larsen-freeman (2000) calls 'absolutism'. These people contend that CLT is the best and most comprehensive method. They argue that the adoption of Western CLT not only encourages local teachers to follow current issues in English pedagogy outside their area, it also improves learners' communicative competence in a better way (as cited in Liao, 2004, pp. 270-271). As put forward by Larsen-Freeman (1986), the absolutists strongly believe in the postulate that people learn to communicate by communicating (as cited in Beale, 2002, p. 12).

However, it seems reasonable to consider that each approach has its strengths and limitations (McArthur, 1983, p. 96). Just as CLT has supporters, it also has people who criticize the dominance of CLT. These detractors argue that CLT has ignored one key dimension of language teaching, that is the context in which it occurs. Bax (2003), one of the leading proponents of this 'relativism' notion, notes that CLT has failed to address the contextual factors of language learning, namely the learners' needs and their cultures. He proposes a 'context approach' in replacement of CLT as a central paradigm in language teaching. He goes on to argue that although CLT serves as a corrective to previous teaching methods and approaches, it is not a panacea for all second or foreign language classroom problems. The type of CLT originated in the Western culture might not be suited to the educational context of the Eastern part of the world (p. 278).

The context approach holds that the context in which teachers teach should be given a priority over pedagogical methods and approaches. Teachers should be able to analyse key aspects of that context before teaching a particular language classroom. In other words, teachers should have a profound knowledge of learners' expectations, school conditions, and local cultures prior to choosing a suitable approach for their students. Effective language teaching occurs when teachers are culturally aware of their teaching context and apply relevant approaches according to the needs of the learners. This is what Bax calls a 'context analysis' (2003, p. 285).

While it is clear that contextual factors should be taken into great consideration when teaching a language classroom, Liao (2004) contends that the adoption of CLT in China is the right solution for the country's language teaching system. In opposition to Bax's context approach, he argues that all language problems concerning contextual factors, such as crowded classes and grammar-based textbooks, can be solved by local teachers and educational authorities. In the context of China, CLT is more appropriate than the context approach which requires a long process and lacks practicality in its implementation (pp. 271-272).

In teaching practice, however, it is not recommended that teachers simply adopt CLT. There are times when teachers should 'adapt' CLT techniques appropriate to the classroom condition. Hence, to meet the expectations of the students, teachers should make necessary changes from the original topics. When a teacher presents a topic to company workers, for example, he/she can find an article which is related to their jobs. If we simply refer to the authentic texts given in a CLT book, the students will not obtain satisfaction from attending the class. Harmer (2003) points out that the concerns of CLT are not with the methodology itself, but with how CLT ideas are

adapted to fit the needs of the students in the classroom (as cited in Hiep, 2007, p.195).

### **CLT versus eclectic approach**

Success in second language learning is associated with many interrelated factors. These factors include the learners' attitudes towards the learning situation and the roles they play within that learning situation (Nunan & Lamb, 1996; as cited in Erlenawati, 2002, p. 323). This is also consistent with Horwitz's research (1987) which shows that learners feel discontented if the teaching methods in which they are engaged differ from what they believed those teaching methods should be. According to Horwitz, if language classes fail to meet learners' expectations, students may lose confidence or in a worse case, they may get stressed (as cited in Erlenawati, 2004, p. 325). These findings indicate that language teachers should find methods which accord with their classroom conditions and learners' needs.

Another important factor that may influence language learning can be seen in the language-culture connection. In this sense, teachers should explore the questions of how a language should be taught to students in consideration of their values and beliefs. Since an approach is a set of dynamic principles, language teachers may implement modified activities in the classroom according to what suits the students. If an activity seems to deter the students from taking part because it is culturally offensive, a teacher may think of doing another acceptable activity (Brown, 2000, p. 202).

One of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary Second Language Teaching and Learning (SLTL) is that it is based on principles and practices of learning and teaching from current theory and research. While contemporary

approaches are often considered as better than their traditional counterparts, it is important to note that some parts of traditional approaches may be useful for SLTL process. McArthur (1983, p. 96), for example, refers to the success of grammar translation method used effectively by some teachers in their classrooms. In this regard, contemporary approaches provide a supplement to the traditional approaches. A language teacher should use a method or an approach based on its usefulness for the learners, not because of its traditional or contemporary status. As described by Nunan (1999, p. 69), contemporary SLTL is an evolution rather than a revolution.

Given the facts, while CLT supports language learning process, it would be a better idea to support the relativist view of the existing teaching methods stating that none is superior to others. In addition, contemporary language teachers should adopt an eclectic approach which encourages them to explore new approaches and experiment with different techniques. In order to find more enlightened and applicable approaches, it is advisable that language teachers enrich their references and take various pedagogical applications into consideration rather than being satisfied with one method (Brown, 2000, p. 202).

## **Conclusion**

Since its birth in the early 1980s, the topic of CLT has generated excitement and interest among language researchers. The origin of CLT can be traced back to the early works of Hymes (1971). In addition to Chomsky's ideas (1965) on linguistic competence, he states that knowing a language involves more than knowing a set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological rules. Language competence relies upon the presence of linguistic and communicative competence.

As CLT continues to be reviewed, more and more pedagogical researchers agree on the postulate that second or foreign language is a learn-by-doing-skill. As such, language skills are learned by doing, not by merely studying language systems. The focus of teaching is not telling the students about language, but getting them to use it. A language classroom should be a place where students are engaged constantly in using language.

While the advantages of an emphasis on communication are widely accepted in principle by many scholars, teacher professionals are divided on the implementation of CLT across all contexts. This controversy leads to two views of CLT: absolutism and relativism. In contrast to the absolutists who maintain that CLT is applicable to any educational setting, the relativists argue that it CLT only works in Anglo-Saxon cultures. In other cases, some teaching professionals use an adaptation strategy rather than relying on the pure adoption of CLT in coping with the problematic issues of CLT.

Given that all the existing methods and approaches have their advantages and disadvantages, the use of eclectic approach is increasingly recommended by many scholars. It is generally believed that various second or foreign language problems can be well-handled by teachers who are capable of applying different types of approaches in the classroom.

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