Communicative Language Teaching

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Communicative language teaching (CLT) is best understood within the broader historical spectrum of methods or approaches to language teaching. Seen from a 21st-century modernist perspective that views teaching as rather more science than art, the theoretical grounding for the epistemology of practice offered by CLT can be found in (1) the second- or foreign language acquisition research that began to flourish in the 1970s and (2) a long-standing functional view of language and language use as social behavior. The interpretation or implementation of practice in language teaching contexts around the world is, of course, yet another matter. A consideration of these various influences highlights the major issues that confront CLT on the threshold of the 21st century.

Linguistic Theory and Classroom Practice

The essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. Use of the term ‘communicative’ in reference to language teaching refers to both the process and goals of learning. A central theoretical concept in CLT is communicative competence, a term introduced in the early 1970s into discussions of language (Habermas, 1970; Hymes, 1971) and second-language learning (Jakobovits, 1970; Savignon, 1971). Competence is defined as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning and looks to second-language acquisition research to account for its development (Savignon, 1972, 1983, 1997). The identification of learner communicative needs provides a basis for curriculum design. Descriptors sometimes used to refer to features of CLT include process-oriented, task-based, and inductive or discovery-oriented.

The elaboration of what has come to be known as CLT can be traced to concurrent developments in linguistic theory and language learning curriculum design, both in Europe and in North America. In Europe, the language needs of a rapidly increasing group of immigrants and guest workers, along with a rich British linguistic tradition that included social as well as linguistic context in the description of language behavior, led to the development of a syllabus for learners based on notional-functional concepts of language use. This notional-functional approach to curriculum design derived from neo-Firthian systemic or functional linguistics that views language as meaning potential and maintains the centrality of context of situation in understanding language systems and how they work (Firth, 1937; Halliday, 1978). With sponsorship from the Council of Europe, a Threshold Level of language ability was proposed for each of the languages of Europe in terms of what learners should be able to do with the language (van Ek, 1975). Functions were based on the assessment of learner needs and specified the end result or goals of an instructional program. The term ‘communicative’ was used to describe programs that followed a notional-functional syllabus based on needs assessment, and the language for specific purposes (LSP) movement was launched.

Concurrently, development within Europe focused on the process of classroom language learning. In Germany, against a backdrop of social democratic concerns for individual empowerment articulated in the writings of philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1970), language teaching methodologists took the lead in the development of classroom materials that encouraged learner choice (Candlin, 1978). A collection of exercise types for communicatively oriented English language teaching was used in teacher in-service courses and workshops to guide curriculum change. Exercises...
were designed to exploit the variety of social meanings contained within particular grammatical structures. A system of 'chains' encouraged teachers and learners to define their own learning path through a principled selection of relevant exercises (Piepho, 1974; Piepho and Bredella, 1976). Similar exploratory projects were also initiated by Candlin at his academic home, the University of Lancaster in England, and by Holec (1979) and his colleagues at the University of Nancy in France. Supplementary teacher resource materials promoting classroom CLT became increasingly popular (for example, see Maley and Duff, 1978). There was also a renewed interest in learner vocabulary building. The widespread promotion of audiolingual methodology with a focus on accuracy in terms of so-called native grammatical or syntactic form had resulted in the neglect of learner lexical resources (Coady and Huckin, 1997).

At about the same time, paradigm-challenging research on adult classroom second-language acquisition at the University of Illinois (Savignon, 1971, 1972) used the term 'communicative competence' to characterize the ability of classroom language learners to interact with other speakers and to make meaning, as distinguished from their ability to recite dialogues or to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge. At a time when pattern practice and error avoidance were the rule in language teaching, this study of adult classroom acquisition of French looked at the effect of practice in the use of coping strategies as part of an instructional program. By encouraging learners to ask for information, to seek clarification, to use circumlocution and whatever other linguistic and non-linguistic resources they could muster to negotiate meaning, and to stick to the communicative task at hand, teachers were invariably leading learners to take risks, to speak in other than memorized patterns. Consistent with the process of language development that was being documented in first-language and untutored or process of language development that was being other than memorized patterns. Consistent with the importance of these various dimensions of language context. There is now widespread recognition of the actual experience of communication if they are to develop communicative competence.

A collection of role plays, games, and other communicative classroom activities was developed subsequently for inclusion in the adaptation of the French CREDIF materials, Voix et Visages de la France. The accompanying guide (Savignon, 1974) described the purpose of these activities as involving learners in the experience of communication. Teachers were encouraged to provide learners with the French equivalent of such expressions as ‘What’s the word for . . . ?’, ‘Please repeat,’ and ‘I don’t understand,’ expressions that would help them participate in the negotiation of meaning. Not unlike the efforts of Candlin and colleagues working in Europe, the focus was on classroom process and learner autonomy. The use of games, role plays, pair, and other small group activities gained acceptance and was subsequently recommended for inclusion in language teaching programs generally.

The coping strategies identified in the Savignon (1971, 1972) study became the basis for the subsequent identification by Canale and Swain (1980) of strategic competence in their three-component framework for communicative competence, along with grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence. Grammatical competence represented sentence-level syntax, forms that remain the focus of Chomskyan theoretical linguistic inquiry and were a primary goal of both grammar-translation and audiolingual methodologies. Consistent with a view of language as social behavior, sociolinguistic competence represented a concern for the relevance or appropriateness of those forms in a particular social setting or context. There is now widespread recognition of the importance of these various dimensions of language use and of the need for learners to be involved in the actual experience of communication if they are to develop communicative competence.

Inclusion of sociolinguistic competence in the Canale and Swain framework reflected the challenge within American linguistic theory to the prevailing focus on syntactic features. Dell Hymes (1971) had reacted to Noam Chomsky's (1965) characterization of the linguistic competence of the “ideal native speaker” and had used the term 'communicative competence' to represent the use of language in social context and the observance of sociolinguistic norms of appropriateness. His concern with speech communities and the integration of language, communication, and culture was not unlike that of Firth and Halliday in the British linguistic tradition. Hymes's communicative competence may be seen as the equivalent of Halliday's meaning potential. Social interaction rather than the abstract psycholinguistic
functioning of the human brain would become an identifying feature of CLT. Interpreting the significance of Hymes’s perspective for language learners, some U.S. methodologists tended to focus on ‘native speaker’ cultural norms and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of representing these norms in a classroom of ‘non-natives.’ In light of this difficulty, the appropriateness of communicative competence as an instructional goal for classroom learners was questioned (Paulston, 1974).

CLT thus can be seen to derive from a multi-disciplinary perspective that includes linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and educational research. Its focus has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learner participation in communicative events. Central to CLT is the understanding of language learning as both an educational and a political issue. Language teaching is inextricably tied to language policy. Viewed from a multicultural, intranational, and international perspective, diverse sociopolitical contexts mandate not only a diverse set of language learning goals but also a diverse set of teaching strategies. Program design and implementation depend on negotiation among policymakers, linguists, researchers, and teachers. The evaluation of program success requires a similar collaborative effort. The selection of methods and materials appropriate to both the goals and context of teaching begins with an analysis of socially defined language learner needs, as well as the styles of learning that prevail in a given educational setting (Berns, 1990).

**Emergence of English as a Global Language**

Along with a better understanding of the second-language acquisition process itself, the emergence of English as a global or international language has had a profound influence on language teaching, confronting language teacher education with new challenges worldwide. With specific reference to English, CLT recognizes that the norms followed by those in the ‘inner circle’ of English language users, to adopt the terminology proposed by Kachru (1992), may not be an appropriate goal for learners (Pennycook, 2001; Savignon 2001, 2002). In a post-colonial, multicultural world where users of English in the outer and expanding circles outnumber those in the inner circle by a ratio of more than two to one, the use of such terms as ‘native’ or ‘native-like’ in the evaluation of communicative competence has become increasingly inappropriate.

Learners moreover have been found to differ markedly in their reactions to learning a language for communication. Although some may welcome apprenticeship in a new language, viewing it as an opportunity, others experience feelings of alienation and estrangement. Such phenomena may be individual or general to a community of learners. In Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico, for example, a long-standing general resentment of U.S. domination exerts a powerful negative influence on English language instruction. Not only learners but sometimes teachers also may consciously or subconsciously equate communicative English language learning with disloyalty to the history and culture of the island. Studying the rules of grammar and memorizing vocabulary lists is one thing. Using English for communication in other than stereotypical classroom exercises is quite another. Where they exist, such feelings are a strong deterrent to second- or foreign language use, even after 10 or more years of instruction.

With respect to the documentation of cross-varietal differences of English, research to date has focused most often on sentence-level lexical and syntactic features. Consequently, such attempts as the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to represent norms for a standard English for international communication reflect a primarily lexical and syntactic emphasis (Lowenberg, 1992). The hegemony of essentially Western conventions at the levels of discourse and genre is represented or challenged less easily. Differences in the way genres are constructed, interpreted, and used of course clearly extend beyond lexical and syntactic variation. Such differences are currently thought of as discursive in nature and are included in discourse competence, a fourth component of communicative competence identified by Canale (1983). Pressures for a ‘democratization’ of discursive practices have in some settings resulted in genre mixing and the creation of new genres. In professional communities, however, conformity to the practices of an established membership continues to serve an important gate-keeping function. The privilege of exploiting generic conventions becomes available only to those who enjoy a certain stature or visibility (Foucault, 1981; Fairclough, 1992; Bhatia, 1997).

**Sociocultural Competence for a Dialogue of Cultures**

Consistent with a view of language as social behavior, sociolinguistic competence is as we have seen integral to overall communicative competence. Second- or foreign language culture and its teaching have of course long been a concern of language teachers. Yet, if early research addressed the possibility of including some aspects of culture in a foreign language curriculum (for example, see Lado, 1957), recent
discussion has underscored the strong links between language and culture and their relevance for teaching and curriculum design (Valdes, 1986; Byram, 1989; Damen, 1990; Kramsch, 1993). So mainstream now is the view of culture and language as inseparable that the term “sociocultural” has come to be substituted for the term “sociolinguistic” in representing the components of communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Savignon, 2002; Savignon and Sysoyev, 2002).

Interest in teaching culture along with language has led to the emergence of various integrative approaches. The Russian scholar Victoria Saphonova (1996:62) has introduced a sociocultural approach to teaching modern languages that she has described as “teaching for intercultural L2 communication in a spirit of peace and a dialogue of cultures.” Given the dialogic nature of culture (Bakhtin, 1981), we cannot fully understand one culture in the absence of contact with other cultures. Thus, dialogue can be seen to be at the very core of culture, where culture is understood as a dialogical self-consciousness of every civilization.

The emergence of a focus on sociocultural competence can be seen in other European nations as well. The free flow of people and knowledge within the European Union has increased both the need and the opportunity for language learning and intercultural understanding. Brammerts (1996:121) described the creation of the International E-Mail Tandem Network, a project funded by the European Union that brings together universities from more than 10 countries to promote “autonomous, cooperative, and intercultural learning.” The project is an extension of the tandem learning initiated in the 1970s in an effort to unite many states in a multicultural, multilingual Europe. Collaboration between entire classrooms of learners is a focus of ongoing research (Savignon and Roithmeier, 2003; Kinginger, 2004).

**Interpretations of CLT**

Although the term CLT may be recognized worldwide, theoretical understanding and interpretations of it vary widely. Some methodologists have suggested that CLT is an essentially Western concept, inappropriate in other than Western contexts (Richards and Rogers, 2001; Rao, 2002). In addition, there are those who consider discussions of CLT to be passé (Bhatia, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Savignon, 2003, 2004). Discouraged by the failure of both grammar-translation and audiolingual methods to prepare learners for the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning and yet encouraged to adopt a variety of commercial materials and strategies increasingly labeled ‘communicative,’ many teachers and even teacher educators have been left confused or disillusioned. Substantive revision of teaching practice appropriate to a given context is ultimately of course the responsibility of classroom teachers. Yet, they cannot be expected to change their practices without considerable administrative and governmental support along with extensive guided experiential pre-service and in-service professional development.

Given the current widespread uncertainty as to just what are and are not essential features of CLT, a summary description would be incomplete without brief mention of what CLT is not.

CLT is not concerned exclusively with face-to-face oral communication; principles of CLT apply equally to literacy. Whether written or oral, activities that involve readers and writers in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning are in and of themselves communicative. The goals of CLT depend on learner needs in a given context. Although group tasks have been found helpful in many contexts as a way of providing increased opportunity and motivation for communication, classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature of CLT and may well be inappropriate in some settings. Finally, CLT does not exclude metalinguistic awareness or conscious knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness. However, knowing a rule is no substitute for using a rule. The creative use of interpretive and expressive skills in both reading and writing requires practice. CLT cannot be found in any one textbook or set of curricular materials inasmuch as strict adherence to a given text is not likely to be true to the process and goals of CLT. In keeping with the notion of context of situation, CLT is properly seen as an approach or theory of intercultural communicative competence to be used in developing materials and methods appropriate to a given context of learning. No less than the means and norms of communication they are designed to reflect, communicative teaching methods will continue to be explored and adapted.

Considerable resources, both human and monetary, are being deployed around the world to respond to the need for language teaching that is appropriate for the communicative needs of learners. In the literature on CLT, teacher education has not received adequate attention. What happens when teachers try to make changes in their teaching in accordance with various types of reform initiatives, whether top-down ministry of education policy directives or teacher-generated responses to social and technological change? Several recent reports of reform efforts in different nations provide a thought-provoking look at language teaching today as the collaborative and context-specific human activity that it is.
Redirection of English language education by Mombusho, the Japan Ministry of Education, includes the introduction of a communicative syllabus, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, and overseas in-service training for teachers. Previous encouragement to make classrooms more ‘communicative’ through the addition of communicative activities led to the realization by Mombusho that teachers felt constrained by a structural syllabus that continued to control the introduction and sequence of grammatical features. With the introduction of a new national syllabus, structural controls were relaxed, and teachers found more freedom in the introduction of syntactic features. The theoretical rationale underlying the curriculum change in Japan includes both the well-known Canale and Swain (1980) model of communicative competence and the hypothetical classroom model of communicative competence, or the “inverted pyramid,” proposed by Savignon (1983: 46).

Minoru Wada, senior advisor to Mombusho, described these efforts as “a landmark in the history of English education in Japan. For the first time it introduced into English education at a secondary school level the concept of communicative competence. … The basic goal of the revision was to prepare students to cope with the rapidly occurring changes toward a more global society” (Wada, 1994:1). Following the research model adopted by Kleinsasser (1993) to understand language teachers beliefs and practices, Sato (2002) reported on a year-long study of teachers of English in a private Japanese senior high school. Multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, surveys, and documents, offered insight into how EFL teachers learn to teach in this particular context. Among the major findings was the context-specific nature of teacher beliefs, which placed an emphasis on managing students, often to the exclusion of opportunities for English language learning.

Cheng (2002) has documented the influence of a new, more communicative English language test on the classroom teaching of English in Hong Kong, a region that boasts a strong contingent of applied linguists and language teaching methodologists and has experienced considerable political and social transformation in recent years. In keeping with curricular redesign to reflect a more task-based model of learning, alternative public examinations were developed to measure learners’ ability to make use of what they have learned, to solve problems, and to complete tasks. Cheng’s ambitious multiyear study found the effect of washback of the new examination on classroom teaching to be limited. There was a change in classroom teaching at the content level, but not at the more important methodological level.

The role of washback in Costa Rica, a small nation with a long democratic tradition of public education, offers a contrast with the Hong Kong study. Quesada-Inces (2001), a teacher educator with many years of experience, reported the findings of a multicase study that explored the relationship between teaching practice and the Bachillerato test of English, a national standardized reading comprehension test administered at the end of secondary school. Although teachers expressed strong interest in developing learner communicative ability in both written and spoken English, a reading comprehension test was seen to dominate classroom emphasis, particularly in the final two years of secondary school. The findings illustrate what Messick (1996) has called “negative washback,” produced by construct under-representation and construct irrelevance. The Bachillerato test of English does not reflect the content of the curriculum, assessing skills less relevant than those that go unmeasured. The English testing situation in Costa Rica is not unlike that described by Shohamy (1998) in Israel where two parallel systems exist – one the official national educational policy and syllabus and the other reflected in the national tests of learner achievement.

English language teaching has also been a focus of curricular reform in both Taiwan and South Korea. Adopting a sociocultural perspective on language use and language learning as a prerequisite to pedagogical innovation, Wang (2002) noted the efforts that have been made to meet the demand for competent English language users in Taiwan. They include a change in college entrance examinations, a new curriculum with a goal of communicative competence, and the island-wide implementation of English education in the elementary schools. However, she noted that despite learner preference for a more communication-focused curriculum, grammar teaching continued to prevail and much more needed to be done to ensure quality classroom teaching and learning: “Further improvements can be stratified into three interrelated levels … teachers, school authorities, and the government. Each is essential to the success of the other efforts” (Wang, 2002: 145).

**CLT in the 21st Century**

In each of the studies sketched above, the research was both initiated and conducted by local educators in response to local issues. Although each is significant in its own right, together they can only suggest the dynamic and contextualized nature of language teaching in the world today. Nonetheless, the settings that have been documented constitute a valuable resource for understanding the current global status of
CLT. Viewed in kaleidoscopic fashion, they appear as brilliant multilayered bits of glass, tumbling about to form different yet always intriguing configurations. From these data-rich records of language teaching reform on the threshold of the 21st century three major themes emerge, suggestive of the road ahead:

1. The highly contextualized nature of CLT is underscored again and again. It would be inappropriate to speak of CLT as a teaching method in any sense of that term as it was used in the 20th century. Rather, CLT is an approach that understands language to be inseparable from individual identity and social behavior. Not only does language define a community but a community, in turn, also defines the forms and uses of language. The norms and goals appropriate for learners in a given setting, and the means for attaining these goals, are the concern of those directly involved.

2. Related both to the understanding of language as culture in motion and to the multilingual reality in which most of the world population finds itself is the futility of any definition of a ‘native speaker,’ a term that came to prominence in descriptive structural linguistics and was adopted by teaching methodologists to define an ideal for language learners.

3. Time and again, assessment seems to be the driving force behind curricular innovations. Increasing demands for accountability along with a positivistic stance that one cannot teach that which cannot be described and measured by a common yardstick continue to influence program content and goals. Irrespective of their own needs or interests, learners prepare for the tests they will be required to pass. High-stakes language tests often determine future access to education and opportunity.

See also: Habermas, Jürgen (b. 1929); Halliday, Michael A. K. (b. 1925); Language Teaching Traditions: Second Language; Second and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching; Teacher Preparation: Second Language.

Bibliography


