COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: CHARACTERISTICS AND PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT
Due to the great potential communicative competence has played in the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches and shaping of well-informed language pedagogies, it has remained a concept that arouses researchers’ curiosity. The purpose of the present study is to closely examine Communicative Language teaching (CLT) and its major characteristics and principles. It starts with a historical background of CLT, followed by the theoretical background. The major characteristics and principles of CLT are then discussed. Then, the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom are identified. The study concludes by highlighting the salient advantages and disadvantages involved in implementing CLT.

KEYWORDS: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), characteristics, principles, advantages, disadvantages

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CLT
The emergence of CLT occurred at the time when language teaching was looking for a change (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Due to the unsatisfactory traditional syllabus that failed to facilitate learners’ ability to use language for communication, linguists attempted to design a syllabus to achieve the communicative goals of language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Wilkins’s (1976) notional syllabus had a significant impact on the development of CLT. To support the learners’ communicative needs, Wilkins (1976) included communication function in a notional syllabus. Notions refer to concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, and frequency. Communicative functions refer to language functions such as requests, denials, offers, and complaints. Based on the notional syllabus, a communication language syllabus consisting of situations, language activities, language functions, notions, and language form was developed. As a result, the design of foreign language syllabus focused on a learner-centered and communication-oriented language instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO CLT
Since the mid-sixties, the focus in linguistic theory has shifted from the study of language in isolation to the study of language in a social context (Savignon 1991, 2007). It is this socio-linguistic perspective, which is the unifying principle and the driving force behind a communicative approach to language teaching. Although this socio-linguistic approach is basically a language theory rather than a learning theory, taking into account Richards and
Rodgers' (1986) definition of approach, CLT encompasses a theory of language and a theory of language learning, and see it as an approach than a method. Briefly, they define an approach as a set of theories about the nature of language and of language learning. It is axiomatic, as it takes a number of assumptions as a starting point. A method, on the other hand, is the level at which theory is put into practice and at which choices are made about the particular skills to be taught, the content to be taught, and the order in which the content will be presented. Besides, these writers claim, "at the level of language theory, CLT has a rich, if somewhat eclectic theoretical base" (1986:71).

**Language Theory**

The rise of interest in the individual and in relationships among individuals, which characterized the sixties, marked the emergence of socio-linguistics, that branch of science where sociology and linguistics meet. A new light was shed on language, not simply as a system of structurally related elements, which form a rule, but as a vehicle for the expression of meaning and social interaction. In other words, the structural view was supplemented with a functional, a semantic and interactional view. It was this idea of language as communication that started off the whole communicative movement (Widdowson, 1978, 1979; Savignon, 1991). And it was Hymes (1972) that made history by challenging Chomsky's view on linguistic competence, and replacing it by the notion of communicative competence cited in (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Savignon, 1991).

In the words of Canale and Swain (1980:7) communicative competence refers to the "interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and socio-linguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use". In other words, rules of use and rules of usage are complementary and not mutually exclusive. According to Canale and Swain "the primary goal of a communicative approach must be to facilitate the integration of these two types of knowledge for the learner" (1980:25). Savignon (1991) notes that communicative competence characterizes the ability of language learners to interact with other speakers to make meaning, and "[it] is relative, not absolute, and depends on the cooperation of all the participants involved" (1983:9). Broadly speaking, communicative competence is an aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts.

According to socio-linguistic theory, the act of communication is seen not as basically an exchange of linguistic messages, but rather as a social phenomenon in which the use of language plays a part. In the field of the ethnography of communication, which Stern (1983:220) defines as "the study of the individual's communicative activity in its social setting," language is a subordinate, yet integrated part of social and situational systems, which are actually behavior patterns. Halliday (1978) argues the existence of a semantic network is the linguistic realization of patterns of behaviour. He postulates that" the more we are able to relate the options in grammatical system to meaning potential in social contexts and behavioural settings, the more insight we shall gain into the nature of the language system" (1978:44). In his functional account of language use, Halliday has criticized Chomsky's linguistic, theory of competence. He says "Linguistics ... is concerned ... with the description of speech acts or texts, since only through the study of language in use are all the functions of language, and therefore all components of
meaning, brought into focus" (1970:145). This view complements Hyme's opinion of communicative competence, and we can only understand language if we view it as an instrument or as a communicative tool. To which Widdowson (1979:50) adds that "once we accept the need to teach language as communication, we can obviously no longer think of language in terms only of sentences." This statement provides the justification for the emphasis on discourse in CLT.

**Learning Theory**

According to Richards and Rodgers (1986) little has been written about learning theory unlike theory of language. However, two of the general learning theories, which emphasize common features among learners, are cognitive theory and skills theory.

A) **Cognitive Theory** - According to cognitive theory, learning involves the ability to understand, to anticipate, and to relate new information to pre-existing mental structures. This focus on meaningful learning is derived from an attempt to make sense of the world. The heavy reliance of CLT practitioners on the mental schema theory is exemplified by Brumfit's statement that "new learning must be closely assimilated with what is already known, and if language is being learnt for use, then new learning must be directly associated with use" (1979:189). Hence, at the level of learning theory this view supports Halliday's claim about the semantic network as a bridge between linguistic form and behavior pattern, a link between words and the world. As Stern (1983:261) posits "The learner must become a participant in a real-life context of language use as a condition of effective learning." Macdonough (1981:27) describes the cognitive process as "hypothesis testing", and adds, significantly, that "rules can only be found if the risk of error is run" (1981:29). This view is reflected in the great tolerance of CLT towards errors. Errors are not to be avoided at all cost; they are not to be seen as evidence of non-learning, but being an external manifestation of the continual revision of the inter-language system. They are essential elements in the learning process.

B) **Skills Theory** - This theory emphasizes the importance of cognitive learning and practice. However, advocates of this theory reject mechanical practice altogether as being totally irrelevant to genuine learning. Skills theory links mental and behavioral aspects of performance through a hierarchically organized set of plans, in which low level of automation is necessary to free attention for high level of planning. Skill practice is considered as a legitimate learning principle (Richards and Rodgers, 1986), provided that it "offers natural options of language use which reproduce the kinds of choice that occur in spontaneous communication" (Stern, 1983:260).

**Characteristics and Principles**

The communicative approach to language teaching is, relatively, a newly adapted approach in the area of foreign/second language teaching. CLT is a "hybrid approach to language teaching, essentially 'progressive' rather than 'traditional'...." (Wright, 2000:7). CLT can be seen to derive from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, at least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology and educational research (Savignon, 1991). It is generally accepted that, proponents of CLT see it as an approach, not a method (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Savignon, 1991; Brown, 1994). For Brown, for instance, "[Communicative language teaching] is a unified but broadly-based theoretical position about the nature of language and language learning and
teaching” (1994: 244-245). He further maintains that though it is difficult to synthesize all of the various definitions that have been offered, the following four interconnected characteristics could be taken as a definition of CLT:

1. Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.

2. Language teaching techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.

3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.

4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts (Brown, 1994: 245).

The communicative approach is a hazy concept, which can have a variety of meanings along the continuum between a strong version and a weak one. Johnson (1979) argues that the weak version attempts to integrate communicative activities into an existing program, whereas the strong version claims that language is acquired through communication. Howatt adds that creating information gap activities, games, role-plays, dramas, simulations etc., are some of the exercise types in the weak versions of CLT. Although we have different versions and various ways in which CLT is interpreted and applied, educators in the area, Littlewood (1981); Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983); Brumfit (1984); Candlin (1981); Widdowson (1978, 1979); Johnson and Morrow (1981); Richards and Rodgers (1986); Larsen-Freeman (1986); Celce-Murcia (1991) and Johnson (1982) put some of the major characteristics of CLT as follows:

1. It is felt that students need knowledge of the linguistic form, meaning and functions. However, CLT gives primary importance to the use or function of the language and secondary importance to its structure or form (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Johnson, 1982). This does not mean that knowledge of grammar is not essential for effective communication, rather systematic treatment of both functions and forms is vital. Stressing on this, Littlewood says "one of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language" (1981:1). "CLT suggests that grammatical structure might better be subsumed under various functional categories...we pay considerably less attention to the overt presentation and discussion of grammatical rules than we traditionally did" (Brown, 1994:245). Emphasis is also given to meaning (messages they are creating or task they are completing) rather than form (correctness of language and language structure). For Finocchiaro and Brumfit "meaning is paramount" (1983:91) since it helps the learners to manage the message they engage with the interlocutors.
2. "Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques" (Brown, 1994:245). However, at times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy because "fluency and acceptable language is the primary goal" (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983:93) and accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in contexts. Fluency is emphasized over accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use. It is important, however, that fluency should never be encouraged at the expense of clear, unambiguous, direct communication. And much more spontaneity is present in communicative classrooms (Brown, 1994).

3. Language teaching techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Classrooms should provide opportunities for rehearsal of real-life situations and provide opportunity for real communication. Emphasis on creative role plays, simulations, dramas, games, projects, etc., is the major activities which can help the learner provide spontaneity and improvisation, not just repetition and drills. Another characteristic of the classroom process is the use of authentic materials because it is felt desirable to give students the opportunity to develop the strategies for understanding language as it is actually used by native speakers. In the classroom, everything is done with a communicative intent. Information gap, choice and feedback are thought to be truly communicative activities (Johnson & Morrow, 1981).

4. Grammar can still be taught, but less systematically, in traditional ways alongside more innovative approaches. Savignon (2002:7) says "... for the development of communicative ability [communication depends on grammar], research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience". Grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences. Disregard of grammar will virtually guarantee breakdown in communication (Savignon, 1991, 2001; Thompson, 1996). These writers also say there are some misconceptions about CLT that makes difficult for many teachers to see clearly what is happening and to identify the useful innovations that CLT has brought. One of the persistent misconceptions is that CLT means not teaching grammar although "the exclusion of explicit attention to grammar was never necessary part of CLT" (Thompson, 1996:10). In CLT involvement in communicative event is seen as central to language development, and this involvement necessarily requires attention to form (structure). In fact, it is certainly understandable that there was a reaction against the heavy emphasis on structure at the expense of natural communication. Nonetheless, it would seem foolish to make mistakes on the side of using communicative approach exclusively and totally disregard grammar teaching.

5. Communicative approach is not limited to oral skills. Reading and writing skills need to be developed to promote pupils' confidence in all four skills areas. Students work on all four skills from the beginning, i.e., a given activity might involve reading, speaking, listening, and perhaps also writing (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Of course, oral communication is seen to take place through negotiation between speaker and listener (most likely among students), so too is interaction between the reader and writer, but no immediate feedback from the reader. Hence, in the classroom, emphasis is given to oral and listening skills, as contact time with language is
important. It paves way for more fluid command of the language. Learners do not hear the teacher all the time, but having personal contact themselves, practicing sounds themselves, permitting sentence patterns and getting chance to make mistakes and learn from doing so. The idea of emphasizing the oral skills creates uncertainty among teachers. They misconceived CLT as if it were devoted to teaching only speaking. But, "CLT is not exclusively concerned with face to face oral communication" (Savignon, 2002:7). The principles of CLT apply equally to reading and writing activities that engage readers and writers in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning. In other words, it is important to recognize that it is not only the speaker (or writer) who is communicating. Instead, communication through language happens in both the written and spoken medium, and involves at least two people.

6. Students regularly work in groups or pairs to transfer (and if necessary to negotiate) meaning in situations where one person has information that others lack (Celce-Murcia, 1991). More emphasis should be given to active modes of learning such as pair or group work in problem-solving tasks in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning. Many people assume group/pair work is applicable in all contexts. However, classroom group and/or pair work should not be considered an essential feature used all the time, and may well be inappropriate in some contexts. Thompson (1996) and Savignon (2002) claim that group and/or pair work are flexible and useful techniques than that suggests, and they are active modes of learning which can help the learners to negotiate meaning and engage in problem-solving activities.

7. Errors are seen as a natural outcome of the development of the communication skills and are therefore tolerated. Learners trying their best to use the language creatively and spontaneously are bound to make errors. Constant correction is unnecessary and even counter-productive. Correction noted by the teacher should be discreet. Let the students talk and express themselves and the form of the language becomes secondary. If errors of form are tolerated and are seen as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills, students can have limited linguistic knowledge and still be successful communicators (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

8. Evaluation is carried out in terms of fluency and accuracy. Students who have the most control of the structures and vocabulary are not necessarily the best communicators. A teacher may use formal evaluation i.e., he/she is likely to use a communicative test, which is an integrative and has a real communicative function (e.g., Madsen 1983; Hughes 1989). A teacher can also informally evaluate his students' performance in his role as an advisor or co-communicator (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Savigonon (1991, 2002) reports that the communicative approach follows global, qualitative evaluation of learner achievement as opposed to quantitative assessment of discrete linguistic features.

9. The students' native language has no role to play (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The target language is used both during communicative activities and for the purpose of classroom management. The students learn from these classroom management exchanges, too, and realize that the target language is a vehicle for communication. Whatever the case may be, "the teacher should be able to use the target language fluently and appropriately" (Celce-Murcia, 1991:8). However, for
others (e.g., Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983) judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible. Teachers may provide directions of homework, class work and test directions by using the native language.

10. The teacher is the facilitator of students' learning, manager of classroom activities, advisor during activities and a 'co-communicator' engaged in the communicative activity along with the students (Littlewood, 1981; Breen & Candlin, 1980). But he does not always himself interact with students; rather he acts as an independent participant. Other roles assumed for the teacher are needs analyst, counselor, researcher and learner. Students, on the other hand, are more responsible managers of their own learning. They are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in the writings. They are communicators and actively engaged in negotiating meaning in trying to make themselves understood. They learn to communicate by communicating (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Above all, since the teacher's role is less dominant, the teaching/learning process is student centered rather than teacher-centered. In other words, it is the learner who plays a great role in a large proportion of the process of learning.

**Roles of Teachers in the Classroom**

The teacher is not a model for correct speech and writing and does not have the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences. The teacher is facilitator/advisor, answering questions, monitoring their performance, note making of their errors, and co-communicator.

**Roles of Learners in the Classroom**

Communicators should participate in classroom activities cooperatively rather than individualistically, be comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rely less on the teacher as a model, and take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning.

**Advantages of CLT**

As opposed to grammatical and linguistic competence that is focused for example on audio lingual and grammar-translation methods, Richards (2006) mentioned that CLT focuses on and aims at communicative competence. Thus, enabling the learners to use the language in a communicative situation to satisfy their needs in real-life communication is a priority in CLT. In contrast, Brown (1994) mentioned that the grammar-translation method "does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language". In this regard, meaning is emphasized in CLT (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) pointed out that CLT focuses on meaning as opposed to methods like audio lingual that focus on form and grammatical or linguistic knowledge. So, CLT shifts from learning structure of language to learning how to communicate and how to communicate effectively.

In CLT, the linguistic system of the target language is learnt best while the learner is attempting to communicate. In this case, the major portion of the learning process is not upon the teacher thus illustrating that CLT classes have moved from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness.
CLT gives the learners more responsibility and involvement in the process of learning. In other words, learner-centeredness takes precedence over teacher-centeredness. Thus, the role of the teacher in a CLT class can be regarded as a facilitator that helps the students and learners in the process of learning to conduct effective communication. This notion is helpful as it is the learner who must learn how to communicate effectively and use the language comprehensibly. Thus, the learner should exercise and communicate enough in the CLT class to achieve communicative competence. In other words, the learner must be well involved in the process of learning. At the same time, the learner is also trying to use the language correctly. Therefore, the focus of CLT on linguistic competence is contextualized and is achieved through the process of accomplishing effective communication (Brown, 2001).

In CLT, learning items are contextualized (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983) but in grammar-translation method, only memorizing a "list of isolated words" is practiced (Brown, 2001). A CLT class may start with communication and communicative activities whereas this stage starts after a long process of exercising and drilling in audio lingual (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Furthermore, in a CLT class, mastering speech takes precedence over reading and writing. Reading and writing are postponed until speech is mastered. Following the emphasis of CLT on meaning, communicative competence and use of the target language in a communicative situation effectively, it can be concluded that functions play important role and are focused in CLT. It is worth mentioning that not only the functions but also the sequence of the functions are taken into consideration in CLT books. The sequence of units in CLT books for CLT classes is determined according to the functions that are of interest to the learner and is based on the needs of the learner in a communicative situation. For example, a CLT book would start with greeting lesson because it is the most basic need of a learner in real life communication. As the units of the book develop, the topics of each unit take into consideration more advanced needs of a learner in real life communication. For example, reserving flight tickets and making an appointment with the doctor are the subsequent units that would appear in the book for CLT class. Thus, the content of the units of CLT books that are used in CLT classes are based on the functions of language and needs of the learners in real life communicative situation and the sequence of the units are based on the learners' interest and their importance for the learners.

**Disadvantages of CLT**

There have been various criticisms on the principles of the communicative approach to teaching and learning language. Discussions on the disadvantages of this method are essential to critically evaluate CLT. Hiep (2007) refers to the recent articles that have launched debates on CLT. Moreover, Hughes (1983) mentions that communicative language teaching leads to the production of "fluent but inaccurate" learners. What is predicted to happen here is the danger of giving priority to fluency over accuracy in CLT classes. In other words, error correction has no significant place in CLT classes. As mentioned above, teachers play the role of facilitator in a CLT class since CLT classes are learner-based. Thus, the teachers would try not to stop the learners repeatedly to correct their grammatical errors so that they can achieve the goal of speaking effortlessly. In this case, accuracy is ignored and "fossilization" (Brown, 1994) of errors would occur and the fossilized errors may never be corrected. That is why prioritizing fluency over accuracy can be regarded as one of the disadvantages of CLT.
In this regard, Mekhafi and Ramani (2011) conducted a research to investigate EFL teachers’ attitudes towards using the communicative approach to the teaching of English in an EFL context. From the results of the questionnaires distributed to the participants of the study, it was found that 58 percent of them agreed that CLT produces fluent but inaccurate learners. So, CLT can follow methods like the direct method and audio lingual method in teaching grammar to focus on accuracy apart from fluency. However, concentrating on grammar and form in CLT can be different from the two mentioned methods in the way that grammar can be focused and practiced in real communication instead of practicing grammar repetitively (Brown, 2001) in individualized sentences as practiced in audio lingual method. The teacher can supervise the learners who are practicing effective communication and inform them of their grammatical errors thus enabling them to be fluent as well as accurate. Hence, both accuracy and fluency will be taken into almost equal consideration in a CLT class.

Another disadvantage to be pointed out about CLT is that it is difficult to be implemented in an EFL context or classroom (Chau & Chung, 1987; Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Burnaby and Sun (1989) and Chau and Chung (1987) pointed out in their articles that applying CLT is difficult in an EFL context due to the lack of sources and equipment like authentic materials and native speaker teachers as well as large size of the classes. In EFL classes, the classroom is the only place that the learners receive input to learn how to conduct effective communication. Since the mother tongue is also used to manage EFL classes, the environment cannot be motivating enough to enhance communication skills of the learners. In addition, lack of native speaker teachers in EFL contexts leads to low-quality input and unauthentic material. Thus, implementing CLT in an EFL context turns to be difficult and challenging both for the teacher and the learner.

CONCLUSION
Compared with other methods and approaches, CLT activities are more difficult to design and implement and place greater burden on EFL teachers. Not only the implementation, but also the assessment of this method seems to be difficult for EFL teachers who are usually used to clear-cut assessment procedures. Considering the perceived difficulties in utilizing CLT demands and what the EFL situation in many countries allows, it can be concluded that such problems need to be resolved if CLT is to be successfully implemented in EFL contexts. Awareness of such problems can provide EFL teachers and learners with insightful ideas about how to manage and, if required, to change their teaching and learning activities for the successful implementation of this method.

REFERENCES


