

A Critical Look at CLT

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Abstract

Before the emergence of CLT, the British language teaching tradition manifested Situational Language Teaching as its most prevalent approach for EFL teaching; however, little by little it was felt that although language learners grasped the rules of language together with the necessary vocabulary, they didn't have the ability to use it in a communicative way because language was believed to be more than the knowledge of sounds, words, and sentences. Based on this idea and the notion that, the best way to learn a new language is via communication, CLT was proposed with the belief that it could lead students to communication by involving them in interactions and communication in real-life conditions.

Keywords

Critical, Communicative Language Teaching, EFL Teaching

1. Introduction

The origins of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are to be found in the changes in the British language teaching tradition dating from the late 1960s, according to Richards & Rogers (2001). Until then, Situational Language Teaching represented the major British approach to teaching English as a foreign language in which language was taught by practicing basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities, but British applied linguists gradually began to call into question the theoretical assumptions underlying Situational Language Teaching. In the meantime, the American linguist Noam Chomsky had demonstrated in his book 'Syntactic Structure' (1957) that the standard structural theories of language at that time were not able to consider creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. Meanwhile, in the field of ESL, some observed that students could produce sentences accurately in a sentence, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom. Others such as Widdowson (1978) noted that being able to communicate required more than mastering linguistic structures. Students may know the rules of linguistic usage, but be unable to use the language. So, scholars such as Widdowson, Candlin, and Hymes could establish the idea that the best vehicle for language learning is communication itself, emphasizing that learners best gain

language proficiency through actual involvement interaction & communication. This shift of paradigm from a linguistic perspective to a communicative one paved the way for the advent of a new language teaching methodology which regards communication as its means and end. The earliest manifestation of this new trend called Communicative Language Teaching {CLT} became widespread during the 1980s and early 1990s. In the last fifteen years or so, CLT has developed into different but related directions. Content-based teaching (is based on the principle that learners may not necessarily have the same area of interest and need, and therefore conducting needs analysis can delineate the kind of language that students need to learn.), Language for Specific Purposes {LSP} (which are in fact different communicative courses with specialized objectives.), & Task-based language teaching, (on the other hand, specifically advocates the application of meaningful tasks which are typical of everyday-life interactions as perhaps the most useful vehicle for teaching communication).

2. Definition

Different definitions have been proposed for CLT. As an example, Brown (2007) offers the following four interconnected characteristics as a definition of CLT.

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

competence.

2. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational 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 which is why Jones (2002) believed that emphasis on pronunciation and its teaching was considered less important with the dominance of CLT.

4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts which is in line with how Galloway (1993) defines CLT.

As we see these four characteristics underscore some major departures from earlier approaches.

However, according to Brown (2000, 2001), and Richards & Rogers (2001), CLT, is best considered an approach rather than a method. It refers to a diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language and language learning. Meanwhile, according to Savignon (2007, p. 211), "No single methodology or fixed set of techniques is prescribed in CLT."

In the meantime, according to Larsen-Freeman (2000), British proponents, too, now deem CLT an approach (and not a method) that aims to (A) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching & (B) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

Nevertheless, Lewis (2002) considers that CLT associates with terms such as "Authenticity", "Cooperative learning", and "Task-Based Instruction". Too, Harmer (2001), believed that the Communicative approach or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the name which was given to a set of beliefs which included not only a re-examination of what aspects of language to teach, but also a shift in emphasis on how to teach.

And last but not least, Davies & Pearse (2000, p. 193), define CLT as follows:

CLT is probably the approach most used by trained language teachers today. But it is implemented in very different ways by different teachers working in different contexts. It is an approach with wide variations, not a well-defined method. By its very nature, it's eclectic.

3. Goals & Objectives

Larsen-Freeman (2000) believes that the major goal of CLT is to help students understand that many different forms can be used to perform a function and also that a single form can often serve a variety of functions. So they must learn to choose the best one that meets their needs. However, Saengboon (2006, p. 137) states that "The goal of CLT is to foster the learner's communicative ability."

According to Widdowson (2003, p. 23), it is that the goal of CLT to develop the ability to cope with naturally occurring language in context would seem to call for a content which is drawn from such natural and therefore authentic occurrences, and the development of responsibility to learners themselves working together in groups.

Piepho (1981, cited in Power, 2008) discusses the following levels of objectives in a communicative approach:

1. An integrative and content level (language as a means of expression)
2. A linguistic and instrumental level (language as a semiotic system and an object of learning);
3. An affective level of interpersonal relationships and conduct (language as a means of expressing values and judgments about oneself and others);
4. A level of individual learning needs (remedial learning based on error analysis);
5. A general educational level of extra-linguistic goals (language learning within the school curriculum).

4. Principles

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), some of the major principles of CLT are as follows:

1. The use of authentic language (language in a real context)
2. Providing students with communicative competence by getting speaker's/writer's intention.
3. Knowing that context clarifies meaning of sentences.
4. Any kind of activity which leads students to communicate is good, even a game.
5. The teacher must create situations for real communication.

5. Techniques

According to Rashtchi & Keyvanfar (2007), CLT has numerous techniques, some of the major ones are:

1. Presenting authentic language through articles, news, movies, telephone conversations, etc.
2. Using games, problem-solving tasks, roles plays, and discussions to help students experience real-life interactions.
3. Encouraging cooperative learning to increase the amount of interactions among students.
4. Acting as a facilitator and advisor on the part of the teacher while students are engaged in group activities.
5. Emphasizing appropriate use of language with respect to the physical context and co-text.
6. Following the PPP model to help students experience.

However, according to Richards (2006, p. 8), under the influence of CLT theory, grammar-based methodologies such as PPP have given way to functional and skill-based teaching; and accuracy activities such as drill and grammar practice have been replaced by fluency activities based on interactive small-group work.

6. Theory of Language

The Communicative Approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication, and according to Richards (2002), with CLT, lessons, syllabi, materials, and teaching techniques can be judged as more or less “communicative. Meanwhile, the goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as ‘Communicative Competence’.

In the meantime, Chomsky’s linguistic competence became the subject of much criticism by many scholars in that it only covered a portion of native speakers’ knowledge of language. Thus, they proposed the concept of communicative competence as the multifaceted knowledge base which is necessary for linguistic interaction. Among the different views on the nature of this communicative competence, that of Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001), is frequently quoted in the literature of language teaching methodology in which four dimensions of communicative competence are identified: Grammatical Competence (which refers to what Chomsky calls ‘Linguistic Competence’ and what Hymes (1972) intends by what is ‘formally possible’. It is the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity.); Sociolinguistic Competence (which refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction.); Discourse Competence (which refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text,) and Strategic Competence refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication.

At the level of language theory, Communicative Language Teaching has a rich, if somewhat eclectic, theoretical base. Some of the characteristics of this communicative view of language are as follows:

1. Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2. The primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication.
3. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
4. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

In the meantime, Nunan (1999) believes about theory of language that language is a system for the expression of meaning; primarily function and communication.

7. Theory of Learning

According to Richards & Rogers (2001), in fact, very little has been written about learning theory of CLT; however, elements of an underlying learning theory can be discerned in some CLT practices. One such element might be described as

the communication principle: Activities that involve real communication promote learning. A second element is the task principle: Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks, promote learning. A third element is the meaningfulness principle: Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Learning activities are consequently selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than merely mechanical practice of language patterns).

In the meantime, according to Rastchi & Keyvanfar, (2007), looking at how CLT actually facilitates language learning, one may be able to discern traces of constructivism in the theory and practice of the method. Meanwhile, according to Williams & Burden (1997), similar to Vygotsky’s view regarding the pivotal role of social interaction in cognitive development, the advocates of CLT argue that the ability to communicate can only develop through actual interaction with members of the social community. They emphasize that communicative activities which required the learners to actually get involved in real-life interactions provide the best opportunity for the development of communicative competence. They also state that there are three elements in real-life interaction that are usually absent in real-life-like activities: Information gap, Choice, and Feedback. If classroom situations are created in such a way that students can have free conversations (similar to the experiences they have in real-life situations), all these three conditions will be met. CLT, more than any other method, tries to provide these three conditions of real-life communication in classroom interactions. To further clarify how communication can help language learning, we can refer to the distinction between the Strong and the Weak versions of CLT according to Richards & Rogers (2001). In the Strong version, learners are expected to “use the language to learn it” (like content-based approaches), while in the weak version, learners “learn the language to use it” (like functional-notional approaches).

Too, Nunan (1999) believes about theory of learning in CLT that activities involving real communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and using language that is meaningful to the learner promote learning.

8. Learner Roles

According to Rashtch & Keyvanfar (2007), learners in CLT are more active than ever. They are expected to participate in extended discourse, classroom activities, and various real-life activities. In other words, as Galloway (1993, p. 1) puts it, “Learners are above all, communicators.” In fact, learners are responsible to cooperatively create an environment in which subconscious learning is enhanced through real communication and interaction.

9. Teacher Roles

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 128), the teacher

facilitates communication in the classroom. In his role, one of his major responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication. During the activities, he acts as an advisor, answering students' questions and monitoring their performance, and as Galloway (1993, p. 1) states, "Because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as a referee or a monitor." He might make notes of students' errors to be worked on at a later time during more accuracy-based activities. At other times, he might be a co-communicator, engaging in communicative activities along with students.

10. Syllabus

Discussions of the nature of the syllabus have been central in Communicative Language Teaching. We have seen that one of the first syllabus models to be proposed was described as a notional syllabus (Wilkins 1976), which specified the semantic-grammatical categories (e.g., frequency, motion, location) and the categories of communicative function that learners need to express. The Council of Europe expanded and developed this into a syllabus that included descriptions of the objectives of foreign language courses for European adults, the situations in which they might typically need to use a foreign language (e.g., travel, business), the topics they might need to talk about (e.g., personal identification, education, shopping), the functions they needed language for (e.g., describing something, requesting information, expressing agreement and disagreement), the notions made use of in communication (e.g., time, frequency, duration), as well as the vocabulary and grammar needed. The result was published as Threshold Level English (van Ek and Alexander 1980, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001) and was an attempt to specify what was needed in order to be able to achieve a reasonable degree of communicative proficiency in a foreign language, including the language items needed to realize this "threshold level."

11. Different Versions of CLT

Though CLT has different versions such as Content-based teaching, Language for Specific Purposes, Task-based language teaching, and Notional Functional syllabus, all of them have almost the same characteristic features, some of which according to Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001) are:

1) Meaning is paramount. 2) Contextualization is a basic premise. 3) Language learning is learning to communicate. 4) Effective communication is sought. 5) Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning.

12. Shortcomings

According to Rashtchi & Keyvanfar (2007), the general outlook of CLT gives the impression that its procedures are more appropriate for intermediate and advanced students. This implies that learners must have reached a threshold level

before attending CLT classes. In the meantime, according to Hiep (2007), although the theory of communicative competence on which CLT is based, is uniform, it is broad. As a result, what CLT looks like in classroom practices may not be uniform. The other limitation of CLT according to Rashtchi & Keyvanfar (2007) is highlighted by those who argue that breaking language into functions and notions keeps the syllabus within the category of form-focused syllabi. They reason that functions and notions are still components of form of language similar to vocabulary and grammar points of the structural syllabus and topics and settings of the topical/situational syllabus. Thus they conclude that a syllabus whose primary focus is on meaning and getting the message across can't in essence concentrate on any single form of language at a time. On the contrary, it inevitably appears holistic and the learners can gradually learn the composite pieces as they communicate in L2.

Similarly, Swan (1985a, p. 3), states, "proponents of CLT claim that it (CLT) tries to teach both levels of meaning (i.e., the usage and the use of language); however, Swan believes that most language items are multipurpose tokens which take on their precise value from the context they are used in. Then on the same page, he gives a very simple example of 'the policeman is crossing the road' and states that it can mean differently to different people at different time. And then he asks the question "can we really teach all of these values of these language items to students?" In the next part of the same article, Swan argues that the main emphasis of CLT on meaning and language is misguided in the sense that it treats EFL learners as if they did not know how to negotiate meaning even in their own language. He says on (p. 9), "language learners already know how to negotiate meaning. They have been doing it all their lives. What they don't know is what words are used to do it in a foreign language. They need lexical items, not skills...." Further, on (p. 10) he attacks CLT's "'tabula rasa' attitude—the belief that students do not possess, or cannot transfer from their mother tongue, normal communication skills, and deems it a fallacy." In another article (Swan, 1985b), he concludes on (p. 87) that, "The Communicative Approach, whatever its virtues, is not really in any sense a revolution. In retrospect, it is likely to be seen as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching."

In the meantime, Pica (2000) argues that since CLT focuses almost entirely on the meaning of message gleaned from comprehensible L2 input and secondarily on the structures, it (CLT) does not sufficiently prepare the learners for eventual success in L2 acquisition/learning. Learners are deprived of opportunities to notice "how L2 sounds and structures relate to the meanings of messages they encode..." (p. 6). Also, as far as corrective feedback is concerned, Pica believes on (p. 6) that "communicative alone appears to be insufficient, perhaps even detrimental, to the learner in the long run..." This is so because, as Williams (1997, cited in Pica, 2000) claims, learners, especially advanced learners, "... rarely receive feedback on their lexical and morpho-syntactic imprecisions, as long as they communicate their message

meaning... . As a result, many of their imprecisions go unnoticed and there is no need for these learners to modify their production toward greater grammaticality, nor to incorporate new grammatical features toward their language development” (p. 6). For Pica, the learners must be led to attend to the form of input as well as its meaning. They must produce the L2, and be given feedback in order to modify their production toward greater comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy.

Meanwhile, there have been concerns ranging from classroom activities that CLT advocates, such as role play, group/pair-work, etc., to its ideological underpinnings. For example, Rao’s (2002) study on Chinese university student attitude toward communicative and non-communicative activities in the classroom revealed that students “... liked non-communicative activities more than communicative ones” (p. 91). This is because the students believed that such traditional activities as Audiolingualism and workbook type drills and practices are still important. Such findings reinforced the idea that a combination of both CLT and traditional method is best. Based on these findings, Rao suggested on (p. 85) that, “... only by reconciling communicative with non-communicative activities in English classrooms can students in non-English speaking countries benefit from CLT.”

Too, Ellis (1996) questions the validity and relevance of CLT’s tenets—particularly the Canale and Swain model, which I talked about above—in an EFL setting, such as Vietnam. His main argument is that CLT approach does not respond well to Asian educational conditions, particularly in Vietnam. Because of its Western value bias, such as “individualism” (as opposed to “collectivism” in Vietnam), CLT is inappropriate. The “product-orientation” of Western pedagogy that emphasizes communicative competence conflicts with the “product-orientation” of the Vietnamese pedagogy that stresses rote memorization and teachers’ ‘words’ regarded as ‘final and expert’ ideas to comply with. Therefore, he calls for the current CLT approach to be mediated by local teachers in order to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms and to redefine the student-teacher relationship in keeping with cultural norms embedded in the method itself.

Along the same line, studies that deal with the effectiveness of CLT in other EFL countries have been reported. For example, Burnaby & Sun (1989) elicited the views of 24 experienced Chinese EFL teachers on the appropriateness and effectiveness of CLT. The findings report that these teachers believe CLT, with its main emphasis first on “communicating” message meaning and, second, on grammatical accuracy, is useful for students who plan to study in English-speaking countries. In China, however, there is no real need to speak English in daily life. Moreover, these teachers contend that their current teaching methods that are based mainly on grammatical accuracy, work better than CLT because most of their students would work in China involving such tasks as reading technical articles and translating documents.

Meanwhile, Li’s (1998) case study about teachers’ perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea mainly indicates that CLT seems not to be well-received in South Korea because of the differences between the underlying educational theories of South Korea and those of Western countries. For instance, there are four major constraints that render it difficult to implement CLT in South Korea: 1) Large classes; 2) Grammar-based examinations; 3) Insufficient funding; and 4) Lack of professional, administrative, and collegial support. These, coupled with another major argument that these teachers raised—that “CLT has not given an adequate account of EFL teaching despite its initial growth in foreign language teaching in Europe” (p. 694)—make CLT “unpopular” among this group of teachers. Based on the findings, Li suggests that EFL countries should stop relying almost exclusively on ‘expert’ opinions from outside and “... strive to establish their own research contingents and encourage methods that take into account the political, economic, social, and cultural factors, and most important of all, the EFL situations in their own countries” (p. 698). They call for local wisdom such as these cautious EFL professionals against blindly adopting Western conceived teaching methodologies, CLT being the case in point.

13. Evaluation

Errors are tolerated in fluency-based activities and are seen as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills. However, in accuracy-based the teacher explains the errors of the students he had noted in fluency-based activities.

14. Conclusion and Final Remarks

An overview of a mainstay EFL approach may contribute to more insight regarding the approach; however, one should beware of the shortcomings. The critical views aimed against the Western-conceived model of CLT which has been implemented in Asian settings share the common concern that the EFL environment where those teachers work deserves a language teaching model that addresses their local, cultural, and educational circumstances. In other words, if such needs are not taken into account, the imposition of the Western CLT model on EFL teaching environments will meet with lukewarm and indifferent attitudes at best or resistance and rejection at worst. It should be kept in mind that one universally accepted model of CLT does not work. Rather, a working definition of CLT will need to be construed based on the context of its use.

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