



A Closer Examination of Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth discussion of communicative language teaching (CLT). It elaborates upon the construct and characteristics of CLT, and then documents research findings on CLT's effectiveness. This paper then addresses components of a communicative curriculum, including the selection of materials, the design of activities, and the development of assessment formats.

Key words: Communicative language teaching; Communicative competence

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INTRODUCTION

Equipping students with communicative skills that enable them to use the language in the real world is a priority goal of English teachers in Taiwan. Communicative language teaching (CLT) aims to promote students' communicative competence, and therefore has become one of the mainstream pedagogical approaches utilized in Taiwan. This paper attempts to provide a more in-depth exploration of CLT with the intent of assisting English teachers in the construction of beneficial techniques, materials, and activities that will enhance their students' language proficiency.

This paper is comprised of six sections. First, it defines communicative competence, the construct of CLT, from which its principles evolve. Second, the characteristics

of CLT are discussed. Third, research findings regarding the greater effectiveness of CLT in terms of facilitating the acquisition of communicative skills will be provided. Section Four illustrates different approaches to syllabus design, i.e. structural, notional-functional, and situational. Guidelines for material development and assessment will be also provided in this section. The fifth section introduces a variety of learning activities derived from the principles of CLT. Finally, ways to evaluate students' communicative competence are suggested.

1. DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

CLT seeks to develop students' communicative competence, sufficiently that they will be able to use a language outside the classroom. Here, then, comes a crucial question: what does communicative competence consist of? Canale and Swain (1980) define a classroom model of communicative competence as an integration of four components, i.e. grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence refers to expertise of the linguistic code, such as the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features. In CLT, grammar is not considered independent from communication, but rather is an access point to trigger meaningful language use in both oral and written communication. Specifically, students are taught to apply grammatical rules to construct sentences necessary for communication, rather than memorize them for examinations.

Discourse competence is defined as the ability to compile a string of sentences or utterances into a meaningful whole. With discourse competence, learners are better able to not only understand the concept of an entire passage, book, etc., but also to convey their ideas in a clear and coherent way. In CLT, students are trained to be

familiar with various cohesive devices (such as pronouns, conjunctions, synonyms, ellipses, comparisons, and parallel structures) to construct global meaning of the text and to coherently express that meaning at the same time.

Sociolinguistic competence requires an understanding of the social rules applicable to the use of a language. Speaking or writing something inappropriate may cause offense. Therefore, a competent language user must know both what to say and how to say it in a certain situation. In CLT, students are instructed on the rules of a culture to minimize the potentiality of impropriety.

Strategic competence is the ability to maintain communication after it breaks down. No single second language user knows everything. It's quite common for someone to lack knowledge of a certain word, phrase, term, and the like. In CLT, students practice the use of paraphrasing, circumlocution, repetition, and guessing through a variety of activities, so they will be more likely to cope with communication failures.

Thus, a classroom model of communicative competence includes all four components: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence enables students to form meaningful sentences. However, a scrambled combination of discrete sentences fails to map out a sensible overall picture. Discourse competence, at this point, allows students to logically and coherently develop their ideas and thoughts. Furthermore, being competent in a language requires more than knowing what to say; as one must also know how to say it appropriately. Sociolinguistic competence is, therefore, indispensable to a proficient language user. Finally, the importance of strategic competence cannot be understated; no one is an ideal speaker or writer, who knows everything about a language. Students with strategic competence are less likely to suffer communication failures, with the result that effective communication is more likely to take place.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

As the goal of CLT is to develop students' communicative competence, what must teachers in the CLT classroom do to enable students to acquire the four kinds of competence, that is, grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence? The following are the characteristics of CLT (Brown, 2007):

- CLT emphasizes functional uses of language in different social settings.
- CLT advocates the use of authentic, real-world materials.
- CLT focuses on fluency.
- CLT creates a secure and non-threatening learning environment.
- In CLT, the teacher is a facilitator and guide, and students are active participants in their own learning processes.

A cursory look at these characteristics may cause some misconceptions about CLT. The two most frequent criticisms are: CLT means not teaching grammar and CLT means teaching only speaking. Since CLT focuses on fluency, many teachers are under the mistaken belief that accuracy is ignored in CLT, and wrongly infer that grammar teaching has no place in the process. In fact, the exclusion of explicit attention to grammar is never a necessary part of CLT. Rather, in CLT, grammar is seen as a facilitative system to promote comprehensibility and acceptability in communication.

An appropriate amount of class time should be devoted to grammar; however, this definitely does not mean a return to traditional methods, in which teachers first teach all the grammar rules and then give decontextualized exercises for practice. In CLT, learners are first exposed to new language in a comprehensible context, so that they are able to understand its function and meaning. Only then is their attention turned to examining the grammatical forms that have been used to convey that meaning. The discussion of grammar is explicit, but students do most of the discussing. Guidance from teachers is offered if necessary. In this way, students can understand the rules far more readily than is the case when teachers lecture on them, as learning is likely to be more efficient if the learners have an opportunity to talk about what they are learning (Ellis, 1992).

Another misconception about CLT is that it means teaching only spoken language. As CLT focuses on encouraging students to communicate, it is no wonder that teachers may erroneously conclude that the emphasis of the process is on speaking. Nevertheless, it is important they recognize that communication does not only take place through speech. Rather, language communication happens in both written and spoken media. Therefore, CLT means not only teaching speaking, but the other three skills as well, i.e. listening, reading, and writing.

In Taiwan, some teachers have not responded favorably to CLT. One of the likely reasons is that these non-native-speaking teachers do not possess the English proficiency levels to successfully teach a language in a communicative way. However, this limitation can be overcome by employing a variety of technological resources such as television, the Internet, computer software, video, and audio CDs. Teachers should never give up on communicative goals in the classroom.

3. EFFECT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Teachers are concerned about the effect of CLT on the development of their students' communicative ability. One of the well-known studies on this issue was conducted by Savignon (1971). 42 beginning college French students took part in her 18-week study. The participants were

divided into three groups, two experimental (E1 and E2) and one control (C).

The three groups had four 50-minute periods weekly for the same basic course of instruction in French, where the teaching method was a modified audiolingual approach, under which students were asked to do dialogue memorization and oral drilling of linguistic patterns. Each group was offered an additional 50-minute period each week to do a different French-related activity. The control group practiced the basic course material in the fifth period in the language laboratory. The two experimental groups were each divided into smaller groups of six or seven students. In the fifth period, the students in E1 were taught to perform specific communicative acts, while those in E2 were instructed in English cultural orientation about France.

The results showed that all three groups performed similarly in terms of linguistic competence. The possible explanation was that they received similar instruction in linguistic skills. However, one striking difference among these participants was that those who had been given the opportunity to use their linguistic knowledge for real communication were able to speak French, whereas the students in the control group, who had fewer opportunities to transfer their linguistic information to real communication, were not.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers should diligently attempt to provide students with activities that will promote communicative competence. In Taiwan, it is not uncommon for college students who have studied English for many years to be unable to express more than basic greetings when talking to foreigners. They cannot expand their conversational range beyond small talk for even five minutes. This may be due to the fact that many English classrooms are overwhelmingly grammar-translation-oriented. Students are taught a wealth of grammar but are not given enough opportunities to apply this linguistic knowledge to real communication. It is no wonder that their oral ability is very limited. Teachers must begin to encourage students to speak out through communicative-oriented activities.

4. SELECTION OF MATERIALS

Two factors contribute to students' acquisition of communicative competence. The first is the students' devotion in terms of time and effort, and the second is the number of opportunities provided by the teachers to use the language. The more communicative activities teachers offer, the more likely it is that students will develop communicative competence. In what way can teachers generate more ideas for communicative-oriented tasks? Teaching materials are a good resource for teachers to use as a starting point in the development of a variety of activities to promote communicative competence among students. The following sections will first illustrate three types of teaching materials and then

offer guidelines for teachers for the evaluation of their teaching materials.

Generally speaking, in terms of organizational framework, there are three types of teaching materials: structural, notional-functional, and situational. Textbooks currently rarely focus solely on one type; many combine two or even all three types. Teachers are the most familiar with structural-oriented textbooks, which do not begin with the communicative needs of the learner. On the contrary, they emphasize the discrete structural or formal features of language by introducing points of grammar.

In notional-functional textbooks, notion refers to structures of language and function refers to different kinds of language use, such as apologizing, greeting, reporting factual information, expressing uncertainty, etc. These textbooks provide a method of developing structural categories within a general consideration of the communicative functions of language. Students acquire linguistic knowledge through the use of language in a variety of situations as opposed to directly from descriptions of the rules of grammar.

Language samples are presented in a situation or setting in situational textbooks. One example is a book for travelers. Vocabulary and expressions are grouped into situations—e.g. at the hotel, at the restaurant, at tourist attractions. Like notional-functional textbooks, students learn the rules of grammar not through explicit demonstration but through the use of the language in different situations.

We all know that there is no such thing as an ideal textbook that can meet all the needs of individual learners, so it is the teachers' responsibility to make these materials work for their students. There are an infinite number of grammatical items and situations in which language is used. The first priority for teachers is to develop a list of grammar points and a list of the communicative or social purposes of language for students to learn. The most important basis for selection should be the needs of the students. If teachers provide students with critical grammar points and useful situations, it is much more likely that they will develop communicative competence.

Savignon (2002) offers two suggestions for teachers to take into consideration when selecting textbooks for their students. The first consideration is student needs. Appropriate textbooks must address the personal interests of the students, which in turn will motivate them to continue learning. The second consideration is the use of language in real situations. Suitable textbooks should provide ample opportunities for students to acquire communicative abilities, such as to interpret, express, and negotiate.

5. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

In CLT classrooms, it is the responsibility of the teachers to generate a variety of activities that promote

communicative second language use. Savignon (2002) suggests five categories of activities, the goal of which is the development of students' communicative competence. The five categories are titled: Language Arts, Language for a Purpose, My Language is Me: Personal L2 Use, You Be, I'll Be: Theater Arts, and Beyond the Classroom. A brief description of each category is given below.

"Language Arts" focuses on forms of the language, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Grammar points can be explained both deductively and inductively to accommodate different learning styles. Familiar activities such as translation, dictation, and rote memorization can be helpful in bringing attention to form. Vocabulary can be expanded through definition, synonyms and antonyms, and study of cognates. Pronunciation exercises and patterned repetition of verb paradigms and other structural features can be used to lead students to make clear and accurate utterances. Students enjoy a variety of language arts games or activities; therefore, teachers should design a wide range of games and activities to facilitate students' learning.

"Language for Purpose" seeks to provide a learning environment in which students feel that there is a purpose to learning the target language. For example, teachers can establish English as the language of routine class activities. In order to understand what the teacher says, students must sense that learning English serves a purpose. In this case, teachers can begin with the instruction of rudimentary classroom needs, such as "Please turn to page number 18," "Please raise your hand before you speak," and "Make groups of three or four students." As students progress, more and more of the activities can take place in the target language, thus providing a significant amount of classroom interaction. Furthermore, not all students are taking a new language for the same reasons. It is important for teachers to pay attention, when selecting and sequencing materials, to the specific communicative needs of the students.

"My Language Is Me: Personal L2 Use" takes the personalities and interests of the students into account. It is generally believed that the development of communicative competences involves the whole learner, and everyone possesses uniqueness and must be served in an individual fashion. Therefore, while designing activities, both individual and group work should be provided to suit students with different personalities. The selection of topics for class discussion or the form of projects for the semester can also involve the opinions of the students.

"You Be, I'll Be: Theater Arts" provides an opportunity for real language use. Through playing different roles, students can experience various styles of language and learn sociolinguistic rules. Activities in this stage include unscripted role playing, simulations, and so forth. In unscripted role playing, students are given a particular situation and then they create their lines as they proceed. Simulations are simplifications of real-world situations.

For example, students might simulate a situation in which there is a bomb on the airplane they are on, and it will explode in two minutes. How will they survive? Such simulations provide students with an opportunity to develop social skills such as decision-making, negotiating, organizing, and persuading.

"Beyond the Classroom" aims to transfer what students have learned in the classroom into the real world. Teachers should try every way possible to make students use the language beyond the classroom. For example, have learners call toll-free numbers or check World Wide Web sites to get information on the weather in London, the hotel rates at the Holiday Inn, etc. Another example is to ask students to go to a chat room on the internet to engage in small talk in English with people around the world. More advanced learners can be encouraged to send their comments on a specific issue by email to a news agency.

Students are individuals and thus have different ways of developing communicative competence. Therefore, teachers must recognize the need for variety in terms of materials, activities, and teaching techniques. Just as dialogue memorization and sentence translation will bore students, role playing and games will eventually lose the interest of the students as well. The teacher's job is to pay attention to what is happening with the students and always attempt to provide them with something interesting to motivate them to learn.

6. EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

After teachers instruct a language with the goal of developing students' communicative competence, their primary concern is how well their students can use the language. How can teachers evaluate students' communicative competence?

Tests of communicative competence should be a combination of tests of productive and receptive skills. In real life situations, different skills are seldom used entirely in isolation. When testing productive skills, emphasis should be placed on appropriateness rather than on the ability to form grammatically correct sentences. Tests of receptive skills should focus on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker or writer rather than identifying and scrutinizing specific details.

In addition, tests of communicative competence are quite often extremely context-specific. A test for a job interview is very different from one for a new product introduction. The basis of a communicative language test should be a description of the language required by the test taker.

Furthermore, the primary concern of tests of communicative competence should be what students are able to do as opposed to what students have not yet learned. For example, you cannot evaluate the ability

of test takers to perform concepts such as requests and apologies if they have not yet acquired those communicative abilities. Similarly, if they have not been exposed to the process of writing business letters, you cannot expect them to write a business letter for a test.

The intent of tests of communicative competence is to ascertain how well students can use language in real communication. This can have beneficial backwash effects. If students are encouraged to study for more communicative tasks, this can only have a positive effect on their language learning.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1980s, Communicative Language Teaching has become the mainstream form of instruction in the field of ESL/EFL. CLT advocates the importance of using a language in both oral and written communication. Therefore, a common misconception regarding this form of instruction is that grammar is disregarded in the CLT classroom. The goal of CLT is in fact the development of students' competence in grammar, discourse coherence, social appropriateness, and

strategies of preventing communication failures. Put quite simply, CLT trains students to say something not only correctly but appropriately. The distinction that differentiates Communicative Language Teaching from other instructional approaches is that CLT emphasizes the learning of a language through its use in a variety of situations, rather than acquisition of the language itself divorced from its application in real-life situations.

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