

The Discussion of Communicative Language Teaching in Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), also known as communicative approach, has witnessed a tremendous growth of research since it was developed by British applied linguists, as an effective approach to L2 learning and teaching. The basic idea of CLT is that language instruction should focus on communicative proficiency instead of on mere mastery of structures. With the guidance of five interconnected principles summarized by Richards and Rodgers, various implementations are realized. However, the implementation of CLT in Asia still encounter a number of difficulties due to some conceptual and contextual mismatches. In the short discussion of CLT, its background, definition, main characteristics as well as its strengths and limitations are contained. The article aims to help foreign language teachers to acquire a comprehensive understanding of CLT and adapt their teaching beliefs to cope with the challenges in practical teaching.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Foreign Language Learning; Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

In the history of language learning and teaching, traditional approaches and methods, such as Grammar-Translation, Audio-lingual, Total Physical Response have faced repeated criticism for not being effective and meeting the requirements of learners. Nowadays, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is widely used in English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms around the world.

The origins of CLT, also known as communicative approach or the notional-functional approach, are to be found in the changes in the British language teaching tradition dating from the late 1960s. CLT has passed through a number of different phases as its advocates have sought to apply its principles to different dimensions of the teaching and learning process. From the organization of syllabuses with regard to notions and functions rather than grammatical structures [4] to procedures for identifying learners' needs [5] to various classroom activities, such as group work, task-work, and information-gap activities recommended by Prabhu [6].

Although many foreign language teachers make an effort to employ the CLT into their classroom settings, many of them still struggle to manage and use the strategy effectively for their students. Thereby, after reviewing the definition, main characteristics of CLT as well as its strengths, some reflections are made to help teachers to relieve some of anxiety and respond the challenges better.

2. Definitions of Communicative Language Teaching

CLT approach was generally patterned upon multidisciplinary perspectives, such as the functional view of language advocated by British applied linguists Firth and Halliday, American sociolinguistic work represented by Hymes, Gumperz and Labov, and philosophical view of

languages such as speech act theory and indirect speech act theory headed by Austin and Searle [2][6]. Hence, scholars in the field have defined and characterized CLT in various ways. Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines CLT as “an approach to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence and which seeks to make meaningful communication and language use a focus of all classrooms” [8]. Brown also describes CLT as “a teaching method for ‘real-life’ communication” [9]. According to Howatt, there are two versions of Communicative Language Teaching—a strong version and a weak one [10]. Additionally, Littlewood pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view [11].

In general, CLT advocates teaching beyond the dimension of grammatical rules of the target language and propose that learners will gain communicative competence through engaging with the target language in meaningful ways. Besides, it is noted that the distinct individual demands of each learner should be taken into account by the communicative approach. Thereby, learners can quickly and amicably acquire the required skills by making the language relevant to the real world rather than the classroom.

3. Main Characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching

CLT is best considered an approach rather than a method as it contains a basic set of principles that can be used to guide a wide range of classroom procedures. Richards and Rodgers [2] propose five interconnected principles of CLT, namely:

- 1) Learners learn a language through using it to communicate;
- 2) Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities;
- 3) Fluency is an important dimension of communication;
- 4) Communication involves the integration of different language skills;
- 5) Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.

In other words, CLT pays attention to the ability of communicating in a variety of settings and ways, authenticity and meaningfulness of classroom activities, language fluency, integration of different skills and teachers’ tolerance of students’ mistakes [12] [13]. It is essential to obey these principles to design the teaching plan, since the application of these principles can create a communicative context to motivate students to use language more actively and flexibly.

4. Strengthens and Limitations of Communicative Language Teaching

Traditional and contemporary language teaching theories and approaches offer a set of advantages, and the CLT approach is no exception.

Firstly, the CLT approach tends to be a student-centered, which implies that there are more possibilities for interaction amongst learners in CLT classroom. Learners assume more responsibility for exercises and communication while teachers serve as facilitators, providing learners the opportunity to voice or share their thoughts and opinions.

Secondly, fluency in the target language is emphasized and improved under the belief of CLT. According to Larsen-Freeman, students’ communicative competence can be gradually developed by participation in communicative tasks, with examples including the ability to produce fluent, consistent phrases [14].

Last but not least, combined with authentic resources, diverse communicative activities like role-playing and information gaps are conducive to encouraging students to engage with and learn from their peers. In the process of interaction, learners are encouraged to express themselves, thus becoming more confident and enjoying talking more often.

Despite the merits already highlighted, however, the implementation of CLT has encountered a number of obstacles due to some conceptual and contextual mismatches [3].

Conceptual limitations, on the one hand, stem from a conflict between the central principles of CLT and the traditional values of teaching and learning in Asia. The rigorous college entrance examination system seems to be the most significant obstacle for implementing CLT. Teachers and students may not have found CLT to be the most efficient and effective means of preparing for the exams. Instead, due to the variety of social and cultural perspectives and backgrounds, many students who has been accustomed to learning passively, tend to believe that traditional teaching and learning strategies (e.g. Direct Method, teacher-centered) are more effective in teaching and learning. It seems that the problem of whether CLT approach is culturally appropriate persists all the time.

On the other hand, conceptual constraints stem from teacher's misunderstanding of CLT, such as their belief that CLT concerns only oral communication, that explicit grammar teaching is not allowed, that the teacher's role is minimal in CLT, and that CLT is only realized through group or pair activities[15]. These misconceptions are more likely result from unsystematic and insufficient teacher training, which is also considered as one of the contextual limitations. Moreover, contextual limitations can also be approached from lack of language proficiency, lack of authentic teaching materials and performance-based assessment tools, large classroom size and student enrolment numbers etc.

5. Reflections on Communicative Language Teaching

Drawing upon discussions, teachers' attitudes toward CLT and their pedagogical skills and strategies influence their practice greatly. Nevertheless, even if teachers understand the basic principles of CLT, the various constraints addressed above make it difficult for them to implement it. Thus, what matters most is that teachers are supposed to reflect on how best to adapt CLT in their respective contexts to maximize effectiveness rather than simply perceive the challenges through implementation.

Teachers can draw on the ideas and experiences from others instead of simply adopting them as ready-made recipes. Teachers need to trust their own voice and construct a pedagogical belief tailored to their own unique circumstances. There is now universal agreement that no one approach or set of procedures will fit for all learners and instructors in all scenarios.

Moreover, it is crucial for teachers to find a midway between the traditional methods and CLT. Just as Li says, the CLT approach is a new development, while the traditional ones are not so "backward and old-fashioned", and its advantages should be inherited and carried forward [16]. In practice, for example, conciliation with regionally acceptable ways (such as PPP, a method comprised of presentation, practice, and production) is possible. By doing so, equal emphasis can be placed on linguistic competence and communicative competence.

In a word, traditional approaches and contemporary ones should learn from each other's strengths to offset their own weaknesses in many ways. It is believed that the best methods are the ones that work well for learners. In accordance with national conditions, we should also always adapt ourselves and adjust teaching approaches accordingly.

6. Conclusion

Focusing on Communicative Language Teaching, this study discussed its background, main characteristics and advantages. It suggests that CLT enables teachers to construct an engaging and efficient language learning classroom, enhance students' language skills, and assist learners in comprehending and applying what they have learned. However, in the implementation of CLT, constraints coexist with advantages.

For future implementation, although CLT is available for teachers to handle and arrange their classroom environments, teachers should always employ the appropriate teaching and learning methodologies and strategies based on the needs and expectations of their students. In fact, although communicative approach has numerous benefits, traditional approaches are no exceptions. It is necessary to find a midway between two of them.

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