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COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE CORNERSTONE OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract:

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. The need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures was felt. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as "communicative competence". Curriculum or instructional objectives for a particular course would reflect specific aspects of communicative competence. Discussions of the nature of the syllabus have been central in Communicative Language Teaching. The range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited. The emphasis in Communicative Language Teaching is on the processes of communication, rather than mastery of language. The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. Emphasis is on the process of communication of the learner. A wide variety of materials have been used to support communicative approaches to language teaching. Communicative Approach which is a new teaching method to meet the demands of the times, with its emphasis on interpersonal skills is better than

the traditional method in stimulating students' interest in learning.

Key words: Communicative competence, instructional objectives, syllabus, teacher, learner, materials.

Background

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. Until then, situational language represented the major British approach to teaching English as a foreign language. In situational language teaching, language was taught by practicing basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities. British applied linguists emphasized another fundamental dimension of language that was inadequately addressed in current approaches to language teaching at that time - the functional and communicative potential of language. They saw the need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures.

D. A. Wilkins (1972), which proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that, could serve as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. Wilkins's contribution was an analysis of the communicative meanings that a language learner needs to understand and express. Rather than describe the core of language through traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, Wilkins attempted to demonstrate the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language. According to the U.S. linguist D. Hymes's proposed theory of communicative competence, communicative competence should not only have the language knowledge, but also has the ability to use language, with particular attention to linguistic appropriateness transport fields. Krashen's language acquisition theory of language learning also stressed the use of verbal communication, rather than through training, language skills. For Chomsky the focus of linguistics was to describe the linguistic competence that enables speakers to produce

grammatically correct sentences.

Approach

Theory of language

The communicative approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as "communicative competence".

Hymes's theory of communicative competence was a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. In Hymes's view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to

1. whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;

Halliday has elaborated a powerful theory of the functions of language, which complements Hymes's view of communicative competence for many writers on CLT (e.g., Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Savignon 1983). He described (1975: 11-17) seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their first language:

1. the instrumental function: using language to get things;
2. the regulatory function: using language to control the behaviour of others;
3. the interactional function: using language to create interaction with others;
4. the personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings;

Learning a second language was similarly viewed by proponents of Communicative Language Teaching as acquiring the linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions.

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 follow.

1. Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2. The primary function of language is for 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.

Theory of learning

Elements of an underlying learning theory can be discerned in some CLT practices, however. 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 (Johnson 1982). 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). These principles, we suggest, can be inferred from CLT practices (e.g., Littlewood 1981; Johnson 1982). They address the conditions needed to promote second language learning, rather than the processes of language

Johnson (1984) and Littlewood (1984) consider an alternative learning theory that they also see as compatible with CLT—a skill-learning model of learning. According to this theory, the acquisition of communicative competence in a language is an example of skill development. This involves both a cognitive and a behavioral aspect: The cognitive aspect involves the internalisation of plans for creating appropriate behaviour. For language use, these plans derive mainly from the language system — they include grammatical rules, procedures for selecting vocabulary, and social

conventions governing speech. The behavioural aspect involves the automation of these plans so that they can be converted into fluent performance in real time. This occurs mainly through practice in converting plans into performance. (Littlewood 1984: 74)

Objectives

Piepho (1981) 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).

Curriculum or instructional objectives for a particular course would reflect specific aspects of communicative competence according to the learner's proficiency level and communicative needs.

The 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) 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."

Types of learning and teaching activities

The range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication, and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction.

Learner roles

The emphasis in Communicative Language Teaching is on the processes of communication, rather than mastery of language. The role of learner as negotiator- between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning- emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within group and within the class room procedures and activities which the group undertakes.

Teacher roles

Several roles are assumed for teachers in Communicative Language Teaching, the importance of particular roles being determined by the view of CLT adopted. Breen and Candlin describe teacher roles in the following terms: The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. The latter role is closely related to the objectives of the first role and arises from it. These

roles imply a set of secondary roles for the teacher; first, as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself, second as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities.... A third role for the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities. (1980: 99) Other roles assumed for teachers are needs analyst, counselor, and group process manager.

Needs analyst

The CLT teacher assumes a responsibility for determining and responding to learner language needs. This may be done informally and personally through one-to-one sessions with students, in which the teacher talks through such issues as the student's perception of his or her learning style, learning assets, and learning goals. It may be done formally through administering a needs assessment instrument.

COUNSELOR

Another role assumed by several CLT approaches is that of counselor, similar to the way this role is defined in Community Language Learning. In this role, the teacher-counselor is expected to exemplify an effective communicator seeking to maximize the meshing of speaker intention and hearer interpretation, through the use of paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback.

Group process manager

CLT procedures often require teachers to acquire less teacher-centered classroom management skills. It is the teacher's responsibility to organize the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities. Guidelines for classroom practice (e.g., Littlewood :1981; Finocchiaro and Brumfit :1983) suggest that during an activity the teacher monitors, encourages, and suppresses the inclination to supply gaps in lexis, grammar, and strategy but notes such gaps for later commentary and communicative practice.

The role of instructional materials

A wide variety of materials have been used

to support communicative approaches to language teaching. Unlike some contemporary methodologies, such as Community Language Learning, practitioners of Communicative Language Teaching view materials as a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use. Materials thus have the primary role of promoting communicative language use. We will consider three kinds of materials currently used in CLT and label these text-based, task-based, and realia.

Text-based materials

There are numerous textbooks designed to direct and support Communicative Language Teaching. Their tables of contents sometimes suggest a kind of grading and sequencing of language practice not unlike those found in structurally organized texts. Some of these are in fact written around a largely structural syllabus, with slight reformatting to justify their claims to be based on a communicative approach. Others, however, look very different from previous language teaching texts. Morrow and Johnson's *Communicate* (1979), for example, has none of the usual dialogues, drills, or sentence patterns and uses visual cues, taped cues, pictures, and sentence fragments to initiate conversation.

Task-based materials

A variety of games, role plays, simulations, and task-based communication activities have been prepared to support Communicative Language Teaching classes. These typically are in the form of one-of-a-kind items: exercise handbooks, cue cards, activity cards, pair-communication practice materials, and student-communication practice booklets. In pair-communication materials, there are typically two sets of material for a pair of students, each set containing different kinds of information. Sometimes the information is complementary, and partners must fit their respective parts of the "jigsaw" into a composite whole. Others assume different role relationships for the partners (e.g., an interviewer and an interviewee). Still others provide drills and practice material in interactional formats.

Realia

Many proponents of Communicative Language Teaching have advocated the use of "authentic," "from-life" materials in the classroom. These might include language-based realia, such as signs, magazines, advertisements, and newspapers, or graphic and visual sources around which communicative activities can be built, such as maps, pictures, symbols, graphs, and charts. Different kinds of objects can be used to support communicative exercises, such as a plastic model to assemble from directions.

Advantages

The most obvious advantage in communicative language teaching is that of the increase of fluency in the target language. This enables the learners to be more confident when interacting with other people and they also enjoy talking more. The approach also leads to gains in the areas of grammatical/sociolinguistic/discourse/strategic competence through communication. CLT is a holistic approach. It doesn't focus only on the traditional structural syllabus. It takes into consideration communicative dimension of language and CLT provides vitality and motivation within the classroom. CLT is a learner centered approach. It capitalizes on the interests and needs of the learner. In a world where communication of information and information technology has broken new considerable ground, CLT can play an important role in education.

Disadvantages

One major disadvantage might be that it is difficult for the teacher alone to check the language use of every student, especially in a big class. The students are allowed to make mistakes but they need to be corrected – preferably not whilst in the middle of a conversation - by the teacher in order to improve and so as not to make the same mistake again and again. Therefore it is not helpful if there's only one teacher for one class. CLT can succeed, as long as teachers don't completely reject the need for the structure provided by grammar. Teachers must strive for moderation and

shouldn't neglect the merits of other methods. CLT, in the hands of a balanced teacher, can bring new life and joy to the classroom. Its vitality makes it an important contributor to language learning approaches. It might be that it depends on the teacher how motivating or boring the lesson will be. The teacher needs to prepare the material at home and needs to make it as motivating and creative as possible so that the students find the tasks meaningful and motivating, and are eager to communicate with each other.

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