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Communicative Language Teaching
An Overview

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Emergence of Communicative Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) appeared at a time when language teaching in many parts of the world was ready for a paradigm shift. Situational language teaching (SLT) and audiolingualism were no longer felt to be appropriate methodologies. By the end of 1960s the love for SLT had almost died down. It was felt that predicting language on the basis of situational events was not logical. The need was felt to return to the traditional concept that utterances carried meaning in themselves and expressed the meanings and intentions of the speakers and writers who created them (Howatt 1984).

Coalescence of Ideas from Various Schools

Such an anti-SLT response was partly due to its criticism by the famous American linguist Noam Chomsky. In his famous book *Syntactic Structures* (1957), Noam Chomsky had demonstrated that the current structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristics of language - the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences.

Besides Chomsky, British applied linguists focused on functional and communicative potential of language. The need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures was realized.

British linguist, D.A. Wilkins (1972) proposed a functional or communicative definition of language teaching that served as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. He described two types of meanings: notional categories (time, sequence, quantity, location etc) and communicative function (requests, denials, offers, complaints). Later on Wilkins brought out a book titled *Notional Syllabuses* (1976) which greatly influenced the development of CLT.

Aims of CLT

Although CLT began as a largely British innovation, focusing on alternative conception of a syllabus, since mid 1970s the scope of CLT has expanded. Majority of linguists now see it as an approach and not a method. The aim of CLT is two-fold:

- (i) Make communicative competence the goal of language teaching.
- (ii) Develop procedures for the teaching of the four skills of English language that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

CLT – Several Versions

For some, CLT means little more than an integration of grammatical and functional teaching. Littlewood says, “One of the most characteristic features of CLT is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language”. For others CLT means using procedures where learners work in pairs or groups employing available language resources in problem solving tasks.

Howatt distinguishes between a ‘strong’ and a ‘weak’ version of CLT. The weak version stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching. The strong version of communicative teaching advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of language, but of simulating the development of the language system itself. If former could be described as learning to use English, the latter is described as using English to learn it.

General Characteristics of CLT

CLT is usually characterized as a broad approach to teaching, rather than as a teaching method, with clearly defined set of classroom practices. According to David Nunan’s (1991) five such principles of CLT are:

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

This shows that the needs of the learners are very important and the connection between the language as it is taught in the classroom and as it is used outside the classroom is also paramount. In a classroom, CLT engages learners in pair and group activities, requiring negotiation and cooperation between learners, fluency based activities that encourage learners to develop their confidence, role plays in which students practice and develop language function, along with judicious use of grammar and pronunciation activities. A few classroom activities used in CLT are such as role-plays, interviews, information gap, games, language exchange, surveys, pair work, and learning by teaching.

Phases

Since its inception CLT has passed through three phases.

In its first phase, the need to develop a syllabus compatible with the notion of communicative competence. This led to view syllabus in terms of notional and functional rather than grammatical structure. (Wilkins 1976).

In the second phase CLT focused on procedures for identifying learners' needs and this resulted in proposals to make needs analysis an essential component of communicative methodology (Munby 1978).

In the third phase CLT focused on the kinds of classroom activities such as group work, task work and information gap activities (Prabhu 1987).

Theories of CLT

Dell Hymes

The communicative approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication. According to Hymes (1972) the goal of language teaching is to develop communicative competence. In fact, Hymes wanted to disagree with Chomsky's theory of competence. Chomsky said that linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

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For Chomsky the focus of linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language. Hymes held that such a view of linguistic theory was untenable. He said that linguistic theory needs to be seen as incorporating communication and culture. According to Hymes, who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use.

M.A.K. Halliday

Another theory on CLT is Halliday's functional account of language use. He described seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their First language.

- The instrumental function-using language to get things.
- The regulatory function-using language to control the behavior of others.
- The interactional function-using language to create interaction with others.
- The personal function-using language to express personal feelings and meanings.
- The heuristic function-using language to learn and to discover.
- The imaginative function-using language to create a world of the imagination.
- The representational function-using language to communicate information.

Henry Widdowson

Another theorist frequently cited for his views on the communicative nature of language is Henry Widdowson. In his book *Teaching Language as Communication* (1978) he explored a relationship between linguistic systems and their communicative values in text and discourse.

Canale and Swain

A more pedagogically influential analysis of communicative competence is found in Canale and Swain (1980), who identified four dimensions of communicative competence.

i. Grammatical competence

ii. Sociolinguistic competence.

iii. Discourse competence

iv. Strategic competence.

Grammatical competence refers to linguistic competence (Chomsky). Sociolinguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including the role relationship, the shared information of the participants and

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the communicative purpose for their interaction. Discourse competence refers to the interaction of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectness and how meaning is represented in the relationship to the entire discourse/text. Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communication.

Exploiting the Communicative Characteristics of Language

At the level of language theory, CLT has rich, eclectic base, leading to a few communicative characteristics of language.

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

CLT Activities:

The range of exercise types and activities compatible with a CLT approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication.

Littlewood (1981) distinguishes between ‘functional communication activities’ and ‘social interaction activities’ as two major types. Functional communication activities include tasks such as learners comparing set of pictures and noting similarities and differences; working out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures; discovering missing features in a map or picture; one learner communicating behind a screen to another learner and giving instructions on how to draw a picture or shape, how to complete a map; following directions; solving problems from shared clues. Social interaction activities include conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations, skits, improvisations and debates.

Learner Role

The role of a language learner in CLT is of a negotiator, learning in an interdependent way. Learner takes a joint responsibility for a failed communication, similarly successful communication is an accomplishment jointly achieved and acknowledged.

Teacher Role

In CLT the teacher has two main roles:

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- (i) To facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom;
- (ii) The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning teaching group.

Besides this, the teacher is an organizer of resources and as a resource himself and secondly as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities. A teacher also acts as researcher and learner, needs analyst, counselor and group process manager.

Instructional Material

Materials have the primary role of promoting communicative language use and influences the quantity of classroom interaction and language use. Therefore, three kinds of materials used in CLT are as following:

- a. Text-based: The contents of the text books designed to support CLT suggest kind of grading and sequencing of language practice. In fact they are written around largely structural syllabus with slight reformatting. A typical lesson consists of a theme, a task analysis for thematic development (asking questions to obtain clarification, taking notes etc), a practice situation description, comprehension questions and paraphrase exercises.
- b. Task-based materials: A variety of games, role plays, simulations and task based activities have been prepared to support CLT. These are in terms of exercise hand books, cue cards, activity cards, pair communication materials.
- c. Realia: Many proponents of CLT prefer the use of authentic material in the classroom. These can be language based real like signs, magazines, advertisements, newspapers, maps pictures, symbols, charts, graphs etc.

Procedure

Because communicative principles can be applied to the teaching of any language skill at any level and because of the wide variety of classroom activities and exercise types, description of typical classroom procedures used in a lesson based on CLT principles is not feasible. Many of the procedures used in CLT are similar to structural-situational and audio-lingual principles. In fact traditional procedures are not rejected but are reinterpreted and extended. The procedure adopted in CLT is at two stages:

- i. Pre-communicative activities: structural and Quasi-communicative activities.
- ii. Communicative activities: functional communicative activities and social interaction activities.

Implementation

Implementing CLT principles at the level of classroom procedures remain a debatable and unanswered question. How can the range of communicative activities and procedures be defined and how can the teacher determine a mixed timing of activities and best meets the needs of a particular learner or group of learners? Answering such fundamental questions require systematic investigation of the use of different kinds of activities and procedure in L2 Classrooms.

Johnson and Johnson (1998) identify five characteristics underlying CLT methodology:

- i. Appropriateness: language must be appropriate to the situation, roles of the participants and purpose of communication. The learners need to be able to use formal as well as casual styles of speaking.
- ii. Message focus: learners need to be able to create and understand messages that are real meanings. The focus is on information sharing and information transfer.
- iii. Psycholinguistic processing: activities engaging learners in the use of cognitive and other processes important in second language acquisition.
- iv. Risk taking: learners are encouraged to make guesses and learn from errors.
- v. Free practice: CLT encourages the use of holistic practice involving the simultaneous use of a variety of sub skills rather than practicing individual skills one piece at a time.

Conclusion

Today, CLT continues in its classic form as is seen in the huge range of course books, and other teaching resources. Moreover, it has influenced many other language teaching approaches and methods that subscribe to a similar philosophy of language teaching.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of CLT is asking teachers to look closely at what is involved in communication. If teachers intend students to use the target language then they must truly understand all that being communicatively competent entails.

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