

## 研究報告

# — The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching — Some Strengths and Weaknesses

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## Abstract

This paper is a contribution to a continued exploration of what Communicative Language Teaching has to offer the language teacher and learner. The paper explores the adoption of CLT in Japan; and examines the effectiveness of the method in an EFL context such as Japan. The real forte of communicative language teaching lies in the fact that it is a versatile approach, which permits teachers to draw on its critical strengths without needing to adopt an all-or-nothing view of it or abandoning the structurally-inclined syllabuses that instructors may feel bound to. Even if grammatical competence alone is the goal of the learner, CLT is doubtless one valuable means of achieving it. The problems that do exist with it – few of which are lethal – are in a sense diminished in light of this broad range of application it has, and the fact that it fills what was once a ‘communicative vacuum’ in pedagogy. While it may not provide the answer to all aspects of language teaching, its contribution nevertheless justifies its current prevalence.

## 1. Introduction: Communicative Language Teaching

Today, almost any language methodology reflects an awareness of the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). Paramount among these is the notion of *language as communication* and not merely mastery of linguistic structures, a realization that has fostered a more functional view of language, complementing but not superseding the structural view. What ‘language as communication’ means has come to be based largely on models of “communicative competence”<sup>(1)</sup>. Communicative competence has been described as “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors”<sup>(2)</sup>. What this “ability” involves has been elucidated by Canale and Swain<sup>(3)</sup> in a model which recognizes 4 areas of proficiency:

- a. *Grammatical Competence – Mastery of the structural properties of language (Chomsky’s “competence”);*
- b. *Sociolinguistic Competence – the understanding of social context and rules of appropriacy upon which successful communication is based;*
- c. *Discourse Competence – the interpretation of speech/text in terms of its relationship to the discourse as a whole and according to inferencing skills based on an understanding for principles of coherence / cohesion;*
- d. *Strategic Competence – the ability to compensate for obstacles to performance and to initiate, maintain, repair and redirect communication.*

Communicative competence theory has provided the main theoretical impetus for CLT by specifying the requirements for successful communication and implicitly prescribing a view of learning *through* communication that is authentic in the constraints (social, grammatical, discoursal, and temporal) it places on the learner. Other factors, however, have also contributed to the ascent of functionalism:

- a. Previous approaches to language teaching frequently left students unable to communicate, despite their control of the formal aspects of language.
- b. The growing role of English in the international community fuelled demand for techniques equipping learners with the means to function in the language and participate usefully and

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directly in social, educational, commercial and political activities (a demand that spawned a simultaneous growth in ESP programmes).

c. Philosophical developments within Austin's Speech Act Theory (ref. Searle's 'indirect speech acts' and Grice's 'politeness principles') emphasised the "performative" aspect of language and the importance of context, appropriacy and deep-structure meaning.

d. An increased focus on discourse analysis and such notions as shared knowledge, presupposition and inference, reaffirmed the role of context and pragmatics in communication.

e. SLA research – particularly interlanguage studies<sup>(4)</sup> and error analysis work<sup>(5)</sup> – served to de-emphasize accuracy (form) in the interests of fluency (meaning) and promote the "semantic and communicative dimension rather than merely the grammatical characteristics of language"<sup>(6)</sup>. Finally, greater emphasis on the learner – the cause and consequence of a surge in affective research – promoted humanistic techniques such as the silent way, suggestopedia and community language learning which fed into the somewhat eclectic communicative approach.

Communicative Language Teaching is the pedagogical realization of these various trends each of which is represented in the following general principles characterizing the approach:

- Language is a system for expressing meaning; its primary function is interaction and communication. Activities should reflect this by promoting communication at the discourse level, being authentic and task-based, and involving learners in the processes of information-sharing, the negotiation of meaning and interaction. Language for communication is thus necessarily achieved *through* communication in as naturalistic an environment and as early as possible, thereby replicating first language acquisition. (While this might appear to support what Howatt<sup>(7)</sup> terms the *strong* version of the communicative approach in which language is acquired solely through using it – as in the 'Natural Approach'<sup>(8)</sup> – this need not be the case. 'Language learning through communication' *is* a necessary but likely *not* a sufficient condition for complete communicative competence; as such it is a notion compatible with the more realistic *weak* communicative approach that allows recognition of the fact

that first and second language acquisition are not identical processes.

- Language is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and, provided the speaker/writer is successfully conveying his message, errors – phonological or structural – are consequently de-emphasized.

- As active participants in the learning process, learners should be given rein- what Morrow<sup>(9)</sup> calls "choice" – to be creative with language and express their personalities and cultural identities.

- Teachers work to develop a communicative environment, analyze student needs, counsel students, and facilitate with tasks.

- The students' L1 is used judiciously, although, emphasis is on maximizing use of the L2.

- Objectives should reflect learner needs/interests and give learners the functional skills/knowledge to meet those needs.

- All 4 skills are given prominence, but form is always subordinate to content and process. Integration of the skills is central, for in real communication they rarely function in isolation.

The activity types these precepts translate to include pre-communicative activities for communicative skills development, information-gap / problem-solving / chart-completion tasks, pair work and group work activities, games, role-plays, simulations, skits and drama, debates / discussions, improvisations, listening exercises and analysis of authentic video.

Finally, what constitutes the 'communicative syllabus' has been controversial. Many believe CLT to be synonymous with a semantically-based (notional-functional) syllabus; others<sup>(10),(11)</sup> rightly wish to draw a distinction between syllabus and methodology based on the idea that even a purely structural syllabus may be realized communicatively, for the syllabus itself is "an inert abstract object .... What learners do is not directly determined by the syllabus but is a consequence of how the syllabus is methodologically mediated by the teacher in the pursuit of his own course of instruction"<sup>(10)</sup>. Whereas certain methodologies do tend to be bound to a particular type of syllabus, CLT could be said to transcend this, and perhaps that constitutes the main warrant for its being termed an 'approach'.

## 2. Communicative Language Teaching in Japan

In Japan, the practice of CLT and its explicit adoption by the policy makers is a fairly recent phenomenon even though the concept had been known by most language teachers for a very long time. Riley<sup>(12)</sup> provides a comprehensive history of the development of English Education policy in Japan and how Japan moved towards CLT. He maintains that English used to be taught in Japan as a classical language (e.g. Latin or Greek), “viewed as a source of valuable information and perceived as a one way channel for the reception of western thought, not a two-way channel transmitting Japanese ideas back to the world”<sup>(12)</sup>. In the post-war era, efforts towards making education more egalitarian encouraged the teaching of English as a set of formal rules to be mastered and memorised. Law<sup>(13)</sup> argues that these ideologies have resulted in “a set of teaching priorities and procedures which over time have become stiff and inflexible, and which now create considerable resistance to the introduction of new purposes and methods”.

However, Riley<sup>(12)</sup> maintains that there have been many calls since the 1980s from within Japan for changes in the Japanese educational system in general, and in the teaching of English in particular. “English language teaching in Japan traditionally has been based on a teacher-centred approach with the term *Yakudoku* used to describe the particular grammar-translation method widely employed in Japanese schools”. As a result of the continued calls for educational reform, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MOE) put into effect changes in the teaching of English in junior high schools in 1993 and high schools in 1994. The changes were based on a 1989 revision of MOE guidelines<sup>(13)</sup> and included the adding of a new high school subject, Oral Communication, consisting of courses in listening, speaking and discussion<sup>(14)</sup>.

Then in 2002, the newly named Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) produced a document entitled “Developing a strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’”<sup>(15)</sup>. The plan calls for greater emphasis to be placed on “the cultivation of fundamental and practical communication abilities”. It lays out communicative attainment targets

for school students, which range from an ability to hold ‘simple conversations’ at junior high school level, and an ability to hold ‘normal conversations’ at senior high school level, to graduates leaving university with an ability to effectively function in their chosen occupational field in English language<sup>(16)</sup>.

These changes were aimed at promoting oral communication as the primary goal for English education. A term which has been commonly adopted for the new courses, and the new approach to English teaching now encouraged in Japan, is ‘communicative language teaching’ (CLT)<sup>(16)</sup>.

There is an assumption inherent in the CLT method that the goal of students of ESL/EFL is the ability to communicate in English with a high proficiency. This simply is not true in most Outer and Expanding Circle contexts. In Japan, proficiency in English communication is just not necessary for daily life and survival in Japanese society (although, CLT has been adopted by MEXT and Japanese educators). More importantly, “the implementation of CLT has been challenging for Japanese English teachers”<sup>(17),(18)</sup>. The question then is what CLT offers the language teachers and learners.

## 3. What Communicative Language Teaching Offers the Language Teachers/Learners

**Authenticity** – In attempting to create an authentic environment, CLT exposes learners to the realities of near-‘genuine’ communication, thereby familiarizing them with the nature of the constraints ‘real-world communication’ entails. This has a number of potential benefits:

(i) Students acquire for themselves a sense of direction in their learning; of what it is they are striving for and why. This has implications for motivation (below).

(ii) In learning to cope with linguistic and paralinguistic constraints of ‘the communicative situation’ (lack of vocabulary, ‘noise’, etc.), students naturally develop for themselves strategies for overcoming these. Skills integration, favoured by the communicative approach, serves as one such strategy whereby the exercise of one skill facilitates the operation and development of others.

**Affect** – By giving them a functional grasp of language, CLT develops in learners a *sense of confidence*, an

awareness of their ability to perform in real settings. This helps dispel the view of language learning as an academic activity providing them with knowledge utilizable only within formal, educational contexts. Further, as Littlewood notes, opportunities within CLT for communicative interaction help students “integrate the foreign language with their own personality and thus ... feel more *emotionally secure* with it”<sup>(19)</sup>.

Secondly, *motivation* is bolstered and learning increased through content geared to learners’ needs/interests and the scope given for teacher and student creativity and expression. In particular, the utilization of authentic materials/*realia* that are in themselves inherently interesting, spurs student interests, helps them relate their learning to the outside world and encourages them to see language as a means to an end.

Lastly, elements of the approach serve to lessen student *anxiety*: (i) the humanistic nature of the student-teacher relationship where the teacher is more a counsellor/colleague or “co-communicator”<sup>(20)</sup> than an omniscient figure, allows for a better classroom rapport. So too does the cooperative nature of student-student relationships that emerges from interactive activities; (ii) the focus on message and tolerance of errors is more conducive to risk-taking as is the fluid, dynamic nature of communicative tasks that do not demand flawless form, but support creativity, hypothesis-testing and the development of a capacity to maximize one’s performance with whatever means one has available.

In light of Dulay, Burt and Krashen’s claim that “attitudinal and motivational factors have more to do with the successful attainment of communicative skills in a second language than metalinguistic awareness does”<sup>(21)</sup>, the affective domain represents an area of significant contribution from CLT. McKay notes context as being CLT’s biggest challenge to worldwide adoption, as “teachers outside of the Inner Circle ... question the appropriateness of the approach for their particular teaching context”<sup>(22)</sup>.

#### 4. Some Demands and Inadequacies of the Approach

**Demands on the Teacher** – CLT places demands on teachers that may not or cannot always be met:

(i) There is a need for cultural sensitivity, particularly where classroom etiquette is such that teaching/learning is very structured and formal, learners expected to be passive ‘sponges’ and most activity teacher-centred. In this situation, typical of many Asian classrooms, learners – and sometimes the institutions – need training in the approach, the rationale and the expectations underlying games etc. in the classroom. Not all institutions are prepared to accept such ‘untraditional’ changes. If they are, teachers may then be faced with other cultural realities; in Japan, for example, separation of the sexes is forbidden amongst adolescents, and getting boys and girls interacting can be both difficult and counter-productive.

(ii) Teachers need to be sensitive to the level, personalities and interpersonal relationships of their students if they are to be interacting so closely together. Failing to do so can result in bad feeling and stunted learning.

(iii) CLT is not for everyone, and non-native and/or untrained instructors may lack the confidence to break away from more ‘controlled’ and immediately operable methods of teaching. Related is the fact that CLT arguably requires greater teacher preparation, creativity, stamina and thus ability and motivation if it is to function successfully.

**Control** – Beyond a certain class size, teaching communicatively raises the problem of control. In classes of above 30 students (typical high school classes in Japan), it becomes increasingly difficult, without the benefit of assistant teachers, to work with and assist students, as well as keep check on levels of participation and L2 use.

**Authenticity** – Not only is the classroom an inherently artificial environment, but most authentic materials require a certain level of linguistic proficiency below which they fail to promote learning; this raises the question of how the approach can follow through its ideals with beginner students.

**Strategies, Errors & Fossilization** – In answering to the demands of realistic communication, students – especially lower-level students and those lacking motivation – may so develop and refine their strategies that, not being able to function adequately in the target language, they lose the incentive to improve upon their performance. In the case of

L1 acquisition this incentive is continually present as a “social or identity-marking function, which makes him/her aspire to the same level of accuracy as is represented by adult speakers in his environment”<sup>(23)</sup>; in the L2 this is unlikely to be the case and the threat of fossilization arises. This threat is exacerbated by the belief in CLT that errors should be viewed positively as a natural part of the learning process in which learners test hypotheses about the target language and receive, at most, indirect correction. Under these conditions, one has to question whether learners are (i) getting enough of the right kind of feedback from teacher and peers to confirm/disconfirm their hypotheses, and (ii) correctly interpreting the feedback they *do* get; for an approach that stresses message over form, teachers may frequently give positive feedback based on successful communication regardless of the ill-formedness of utterances. Learners may interpret such feedback as confirmation of their hypotheses, a misconstrued notion that may reinforce erroneous structures.

**Evaluation** – Evaluating communicative competence objectively is problematical, for the construction of a model that simultaneously allows for the testing of all areas of competence is as yet elusive. Individual areas may be tested separately via a mixture of discrete-point and integrative tests such as cloze, but this is not ideal given the authenticity principle underlying CLT. Having two or three testers evaluating pairs of students has been viewed as a solution, however the dynamics and ability/personality differences among group members could lead to bias, and there still remains the problem of raters rating consistently.

### 5. Conclusion

Most scholars agree that the aim of language teaching is to achieve communicative competence. And, communicative language teaching is a versatile approach which permits teachers to draw on its critical strengths without needing to adopt an all-or-nothing view of it or abandon structurally-inclined syllabuses that instructors may feel bound to. As a professor of English language teaching (ELT) at the graduate school of Akita International University, I have had the opportunity to train, and observe English language teachers in elementary, junior high, high school and college levels in Japan. From these experiences, I have been able to make the following observations: In

Japan, especially in high schools, two issues arise with respect to having real ‘communicative’ activities in the classroom. First, “various concerns and anxieties exist among school teachers”<sup>24</sup>. In my observations of English language classes in high schools in Japan, the teachers have in most cases resorted to teaching English through the grammar translation method (*Yakudoku*) rather than take chances with their levels of English, which by most parameters can be sufficient for what is needed by their students. The second issue is that “the need to use foreign language (English language) is not felt by students to be pressing”<sup>25</sup>. They will study English to pass the entrance examinations required to get admitted into tertiary institutions in Japan. For the students and for the teachers, grammatical competence seems to be the goal. Even if grammatical competence alone is the goal of the learner, CLT is doubtless one valuable means of achieving it. The problems that do exist with it – few of which are lethal – are in a sense diminished in light of this broad range of application it has, and the fact that it fills what was once a ‘communicative vacuum’ in pedagogy. While it may not provide the answer to all aspects of language teaching, its contribution nevertheless justifies its current prevalence. The introduction of English classes at elementary schools in Japan from 2011, with specific focus on listening and speaking<sup>26</sup>, is a very good opportunity to embrace the CLT approaches early. If properly implemented, it will not be too long before the Japanese students can match the proficiency levels of their counterparts in Korea, China and some other Asian countries. It is therefore my view that CLT should be actively encouraged in all English classrooms in Japan.

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## － コミュニカティブ言語教授法へのアプローチ －

### その利点と欠点

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## 要 旨

コミュニカティブ言語教授法 (CLT) が指導者や学習者に何を提供すべきかということについてはこれまでも研究されて来たが、本稿は、それらの研究に貢献する目的で書かれた。本稿は、日本での CLT の普及状況を概観し、日本のような EFL コンテキストでの CLT の効果を検証する。コミュニカティブ言語教授法の真の強みは、それが融通のきくアプローチであるという事実である。言い換えれば、CLT の決め手となる長所を引き出すために、教師はオール・オア・ナッシングの立場を取る必要がない。また、指導者によっては、文法構造を重視したシラバスを必ず使用しなくてはならないと思っているかもしれないが、そのようなシラバスを放棄する必要もない。たとえ学習者の目標が文法的能力の習得だけだとしても、CLT がその達成に有効な手段の一つであることは疑いない。CLT に問題点は存在するものの、致命的な問題は数少ない。CLT は幅広いアプリケーションであり、また、かつての教授法におけるコミュニケーションの不在を補填しているという事実がある。それらの事実を考慮すれば、現存する CLT の問題は、ある意味取るに足らない物である。CLT は言語教育のすべての局面における問題を解決できる訳ではないかも知れない。しかし、CLT がもたらした成果は、CLT が現在広く行き渡っていることを正当化するものである。

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