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# Communicative Language Teaching : A Reappraisal

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# Communicative Language Teaching : A Reappraisal

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## Introduction

It is notoriously difficult for ESL/EFL teachers to reach agreement on even the most basic theoretical and methodological issues. One of the few non-controversial statements that can be made is that the communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) is “the approach to syllabus and materials design that has had the greatest significance world-wide for the current practice of English language teaching” (McDonough and Shaw, 1994: 19). Although the impact of CLT on classroom materials and pedagogy may be beyond doubt, this paper will argue that some of the most basic claims that CLT makes about language learning and teaching remain very much open to debate.

I hope to show that there is a significant amount of compelling evidence to suggest that the confidence that many of us have in CLT claims may be naïve and misplaced, and that at least three of the assumptions that we commonly take into our classrooms need to be reevaluated. My aim is to help teachers clarify what these assumptions are and how they may be hindering their learners’ efforts to acquire a second language. It is not my intention to add to the proliferation of teaching strategies, so I have largely, though not completely, avoided specific methodological recommendations. I would be satisfied if the paper helps teachers undertake the important task of the ongoing clarification and reassessment of their beliefs and practices.

I should also note that the paper has been written with oral communication classes at Japanese universities in mind, but most of the arguments made are meant to apply to other levels, language skills, and educational contexts in which CLT principles prevail.

### **1. Maximize the amount of time students engage in the production of ‘meaningful’ language**

CLT certainly did not invent the idea that ample opportunity for production of the target language is essential to acquisition. The audio-lingual method also

placed great importance on production, although its emphasis on substitution and transformation drills has been much-criticized by CLT proponents. The argument, of course, is that such drills are fundamentally useless in promoting language acquisition since they consist of what has variously been called 'meaningless,' 'unreal' and 'inauthentic' language. In this section, I will discuss questions that recent research raises about the two related issues of a) the place of production in the classroom, and b) the concept of 'meaningful'/'meaningless' language. I will begin with the latter point first.

### **A. Meaningful Language**

CLT views the language we use in our classrooms to be 'meaningful' to the extent that it simulates the ways we use language in 'natural' settings in the 'real' world outside of it. A core criticism of the audio-lingual method is that it relies on the 'contrived' language of substitution and transformation drills. Since the early days of the CLT 'revolution,' material writers have spent tremendous amounts of time, effort and energy in developing activities such as the information gap to more closely approximate 'natural' or 'real world' conditions. Teachers and students alike have found these activities to be of value, and few of us would want to banish them from our classrooms; fewer still would argue for a return to an exclusive diet of repetitive substitution drills. I would argue, however, that we need to reconsider whether the dichotomy we have established between 'meaningful' and 'non-meaningful' language has been an accurate or productive one.

On the one hand, we may agree that the 'contrived' language of grammar drills is 'meaningless' in the sense that students will never encounter or be called on to reproduce the language patterns exactly as they practiced them in the classroom. It is an extremely large leap, however, to claim that such practice is of no use whatsoever. Although old-fashioned drill work has few supporters today, there has been a discernible trend towards a return to more highly structured form-focused activities that are viewed as being helpful in increasing fluency, improving accuracy, and adding high-frequency conversational formulas to a learner's linguistic repertoire (e.g. Ellis, 1988, 1995; Fotos, 1993, 1994; Schmidt, 1995; Van Patten and Cadierno, 1993).

It has taken many years for a focus on the formal properties of language to gain re-admittance to our classrooms, largely because CLT's early repudiation of the audio-lingual method was so swift and uncompromising. Hindsight allows us to see that the initial claims that learners taught under the audio-lingual method were unable to acquire a second language were unfair and inaccurate:

many clearly achieved high degrees of success. Indeed, on closer inspection the commonly held belief in the superiority of CLT is based on little more than intuition and wishful thinking. It should not be forgotten that it is impossible to determine with precision the influence that any teaching method has on language acquisition. Any attempt to take such a measurement would have to somehow separate out all of the variables external to the method itself, such as the learner's age, number of contact hours with the target language, motivation, learning style, aptitude, and a host of others. The implication, of course, is that there can also be no reliable ways of comparing the rates of success between the audio-lingual and CLT methods. Fortunately, much of the initial over-confidence in the truth claims of CLT is being replaced by a more reasonable acceptance of its theoretical limitations.

Another question related to the issue of 'meaningful' language is the degree to which a classroom can simulate the 'natural conditions' of communication. Much of what we do in class is by necessity, as Swan (1985) long ago pointed out, contrived to greater or lesser degrees. It is easy for us to forget that many of the activities we may spend a great deal of time and energy in developing require of our students a "willing suspension of disbelief" that they may or may not be willing to make. Any task that provides a context (e.g. 'You're at a department store') or assigns a role (e.g. 'You're a clerk') is contrived, but would we really want to argue that such activities have no pedagogical value? If we take the argument against the usefulness of 'contrived' language seriously, we must realize that the only time that a student comes close to avoiding it is when he or she is talking about personal experiences, ideas and opinions. As important as such learner-generated activities are, they do have their limitations and drawbacks, some of which will be discussed later.

CLT also supports the use of 'authentic' materials for input, and it is quite common for teachers to use newspapers, poems, songs, and other materials not originally intended for use by language learners. Such materials are thought to be inherently more interesting than commercially available ELT materials and therefore of more motivational value. It may be the case, however, that it is the teacher who finds these materials interesting, not the student. In fact, learners in a study by Peacock (1997: 152) found authentic materials to be "significantly less interesting than artificial materials." Peacock does go on to argue that data suggest that the use of authentic materials did increase student concentration on and involvement with the activities, possibly because the less finely-tuned language found in them is more demanding. The benefit of such materials, then, is not to be dismissed lightly. However, since the level of

interest in classroom activities is closely related to the level of motivation towards learning, an overuse of authentic materials may be counter-productive in the long run.

Guy Cook (1997: 224) takes an even more critical stance towards the status CLT awards to authentic materials, arguing that language teaching “is still suffering from the disruptive effects” of their overvaluation. Cook is not concerned with motivation, but basis his criticism instead on the slipperiness of the definition of ‘authentic.’ Specifically, he disagrees with the notion that language employed to aid learning, commonly containing simplified grammar and lexis and a reduction in speaking speed, is somehow ‘inauthentic.’ Indeed, Cook argues that it would be extremely *unnatural* to speak any other way to either a child learning his or her L1, or an adult of still limited proficiency learning a target language.

Above all, it is this just-mentioned tendency to equate the L1 and L2 acquisition processes that Cook finds so troubling. Typically, central to the argument in favor of the use of ‘authentic’ language is the claim that since we learn our L1 quickly and effortlessly through exposure to ‘authentic’ language, an adult learning an L2 should be exposed to the same type of language. Cook urges us to question whether a child’s L1 acquisition process offers the best model for L2 language teachers. He argues that L1 acquisition is not nearly as neat or quick a process as we tend to believe. How many years and how many contact hours, after all, does it take until a child is speaking in extended, coherent and cohesive discourse? Furthermore, ‘natural’ does not necessarily mean the most efficient (see Larsen-Freeman, 1995). As teachers, we are trying to find the most efficient ways to help students acquire their second language, and if there is an ‘artificial’ way to do this, I assume most of us would take advantage of it.

Finally, and perhaps most provocatively, Cook (1997: 228) argues that even if we take the ‘natural’ L1 acquisition process of children as our model, we need to adjust our understanding of the language they are exposed to. Children’s rhymes from “Humpty Dumpty” to “This Little Pig,” as well as stories like “The Cat in the Hat,” are notable for the playful ways in which language is used. ‘Sound play’ (e.g. rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration) and ‘grammatical play’ (e.g. repetition and parallelism) are significant features of these texts and therefore of children’s language acquisition process. That is, the ‘meaningful’ language that is so central to CLT theory on L2 acquisition may not be the definitive feature of the language of our most formative L1 experiences. Cook (1997: 228) observes of children:

Supposedly the best and most natural language acquirers, they do all the things that contemporary approaches would have us avoid: repetition, rote learning, substitution tables, saying things without understanding them, producing and receiving language which communicates little.

The implications are clear: if we are really convinced that L2 acquisition should simulate the processes of L1 acquisition, then there is justification in bringing back all those long-maligned activities mentioned in the quotation above. At the very least, we either need to rethink the claim that the L1 acquisition process offers the ideal model for our L2 learners, or we should grant that repetition, rote learning and other 'childish' responses to language have a place (again) in our classrooms.

### **B. Production and Language Learning**

That students 'learn to speak by speaking' has become a pedagogical commonplace, and a quick look at ELT materials shows that most are designed to maximize student speaking time. There is reason to believe, however, that the rush to get students speaking as much and as quickly as possible may be counter-productive.

First, and somewhat ironically, to do so ignores two of CLT's major tenets: Krashen's input hypothesis and silent period hypothesis. Krashen's (e.g. 1985) argument that copious amounts of comprehensible input is the crucial ingredient for acquiring an L2 is well-known and widely-supported. Teachers should always ask, however, whether students are being provided with sufficient amounts of such input. I believe that we have the tendency to expect them to be able to access and use for productive purposes language they were exposed to earlier in their education, with the result that we may short change our learners of input. This tendency is bolstered by many commercially available materials that provide students with only the bare bones of a discussion topic or conversational activity. Many seem to be limited to capturing student interest in a given topic, and focus predominantly on brainstorming or other pre-task activities that are meant to stimulate the student's thinking. Many teachers would argue, of course, that this stimulation is sufficient and that students profit more from struggling to express the meanings that they want and need to express, rather than relying on language prepared for them in a textbook. However, we need to remember that being asked to carry out activities without prior exposure to a sufficient amount of input can cause frustration that will have negative effects not only on performance, but also on motivation. We

also need to constantly reevaluate whether the students are linguistically capable of building on the foundations a given activity offers, and guard against asking them to perform at a level clearly beyond their current linguistic ability.

Another concept associated with Krashen (e.g. 1985) is the 'silent period hypothesis,' which states that before we can expect learners to produce the target language, they need to go through a period of productive silence during which they can sort out for themselves the linguistic system they will soon be using. Since this hypothesis is based on the observation of the process that children go through in acquiring their L1, it remains a theoretical concept based on the questionable notion that L1 and L2 acquisition are essentially identical. I have already noted Cook's (1997) counter-arguments to this equation, and a number of other researchers (see especially Bley-Vroman, 1988) reject the equation on different grounds. Whether or not we believe that the two processes of acquisition are comparable, there is a strong argument on affective grounds against insisting on early production.

Years ago, Gary (1978) argued that since speaking a foreign language in the semi-public setting of the classroom can cause a high degree of anxiety, classroom activities should first focus on the learners' receptive skills. By allowing students safe, anonymous outlets for response, we can reduce potential anxiety that may inhibit acquisition and/or destroy motivation.

More recently, and for different reasons, Ellis (e.g. 1995) has also argued for the increased use of reception-based activities. Instead of affective issues, he basis his arguments on the concept of "developmental constraints" found in the work of Miesel, Clahsen and Pienemann (1981) and later Pienemann (1989). Briefly stated, this research claims that there are universal and largely invariant developmental stages that language learners pass through, and that unless learners are at a stage at which they are ready to acquire a given structure, insisting they produce that structure will not foster acquisition. Production can be useful, however, in helping learners achieve fluency with the features that already exist in their interlanguage (e.g. Ellis, 1990, 1995; Bardovi-Harlig, 1995).

Ellis (1995; see also Fotos, 1993, 1994) urges the adoption of "interpretation tasks," which are comprehension-based activities that require little or no production by the learner. The activities are organized to help learners achieve three goals: 1) to notice a specific grammatical feature, 2) to understand the meaning(s) conveyed by that feature, and 3) to compare the feature with its present representation in the learner's own interlanguage. Interpretation tasks grew out of earlier work by Sharwood-Smith (1981) on "consciousness raising"

and find support in the work of Schmidt (e.g. 1992, 1996) on “noticing.” The sources cited above (for a more recent treatment, see Thornbury, 1997) provide theoretical background and methodological applications of the approach, and some recent ELT materials (see especially the *Impact* series from Lingual House) include a number of classroom activities.

## 2. Grammar does not need to be explicitly taught

The increasing interest that consciousness raising and noticing activities are receiving grows out of a response to another claim associated with CLT and still supported by many teachers: there is no need for the explicit teaching of grammar in our language classrooms. Once again, Krashen (e.g. Krashen and Terrell, 1981 and Krashen, 1985) is closely associated with the view that a focus on form is unnecessary and indeed counter-productive, and that grammatical accuracy will eventually take care of itself with enough exposure to comprehensible input.

The theoretical underpinnings of this claim are again based on the L1 = L2 argument. That is, since we are not explicitly taught grammar in our L1, there is no need to do so when acquiring an L2. More accurately, explicit grammar work (or ‘focus on form’ as it is now more commonly called) is viewed as doing more harm than good, and teachers are advised to avoid it. Although Krashen (1985) admits that there are affective, age and motivational constraints that potentially work against the learner, one’s interlanguage is seen as gradually moving towards native-speaker accuracy over time.

Given the stubborn fact that the gradual movement towards grammatical accuracy has failed to materialize as advertised, it seems a safe bet that many teachers have trouble putting their faith in the L1 = L2 equation. As disappointing as this state of affairs may be, it is also true that evidence has been mounting (e.g. Lightbown and Spada, 1990; Ellis, 1988; Doughty, 1991 and Larsen-Freeman, 1995) that learners who have explicit grammar instruction do in fact outperform students who have learned in either naturalistic settings or in classrooms that offer no explicit grammar instruction.

There is still a great deal of debate on exactly what kind of form-focused instruction is the most effective, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline all the approaches. At present, the most pressing business is to make sure that teachers are aware of the overwhelming evidence that suggests that grammar does not simply take care of itself. The methods receiving the most attention are based on the consciousness-raising and noticing models mentioned



earlier, but before we start searching for a specific teaching strategy we must first let go of the long-held view that a teacher should be limited to the role of a 'communicator'/'facilitator' who organizes and presents activities and then stands out of the way so students can have the chance to use language for themselves. A certain amount of time should be set aside in which the 'teacher' is at the center teaching the structures of the language in the way that best suits his or her learners. This brings us to the final claim I would like to investigate: 'learner-centered' versus 'teacher-centered' classrooms.

### **3. Language classes should be learner-centered**

Another aim of CLT has been to alter the 'teacher-centered' approach to learning in which teachers are the focus of attention and locus of power. Above all, this meant replacing the older practice of having the teacher lecture about the target language with an emphasis on giving learners the chance to use language for themselves. CLT views the former approach as leading only to meta-lingual knowledge, and not the acquisition of language itself. By shifting focus to the learner, the main responsibility of a teacher is to organize the class to give students as much opportunity to use the language as possible.

As suggested earlier, however, merely having a teacher set up an activity and step out of the way is questionable teaching practice. Many researchers (e.g. Harmer, 1991: 49) have argued that the most effective classrooms offer a mixture of tightly organized activities that focus on a specific structure and demand accuracy, together with more open-ended 'learner-centered' activities aimed at developing fluency. Harmer (1991) emphasizes that lower-level students will need more of the former, but as I argued earlier, we often rely more on open-ended activities due to the generally accepted belief that our students are 'false beginners.' To strike the proper balance between highly structured and open-ended activities, we first need to reevaluate the extent to which our students are really 'false beginners.' It is true that they have had many years of exposure to the target language by the time we meet them in a university language class, but most are better thought of as true beginners in an oral communication class, especially when asked to deal with discussion-based activities.

The concept of 'learner-centered' classrooms also needs to be viewed in a broader framework that takes cultural differences into account. Despite significant changes in Japan in recent years, education at most levels remains very much a 'teacher-centered' affair. To what degree, then, can we or should

we expect our students to adapt to and flourish in our 'learner-centered' classrooms? We need to be aware that the very concept 'learner-centered,' which may seem so natural to those of us trained in CLT or educated in a 'learner-centered' system, may still be quite foreign to many of our students. Specifically, we need to address the question of the degree to which we should expect our students to adjust to such a style.

Karen Johnson (1995: 5) has coined the term "classroom communicative competence" to refer to the behavior and interactional patterns that are viewed as appropriate in a given language classroom. For Johnson, the problem is that the norms for acceptable classroom behavior are too often based on a one-sided decision made by the teacher. For a typical teacher trained in CLT and/or raised in a Western culture, 'proper' classroom behavior will entail verbal, voluble, and frequent participation. Students who don't adhere to these norms are often thought to be unmotivated, disinterested, or even worse, intellectually or academically incompetent. What we need to realize, Johnson (1995: 13) argues, is that whenever we demand behavior that students aren't used to, we "inhibit students' opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and use of language" when we should instead attempt to "maximize students' competencies within the second language classroom" (1995: 14).

This means that it is the teacher's responsibility to include activities that play to the learner's strengths and allow them to participate in ways they are familiar with and can excel at. The implications of this argument are enormous. If we find ourselves in a teacher-centered, form-focused, group-oriented environment that values receptive over productive learning, it is our responsibility to adapt our classroom procedures to come to some kind of accommodation with these different values. We should not view this adaptation as an abandonment of a principle, but see it instead as the chance to extend and broaden our teaching techniques to better address our students' strengths and needs. The 'learner-centered' approach is not the only legitimate form of learning, and we would be better off to avoid thinking in the extremes of 'teacher-centered' versus 'learner-centered' education and spend our energy instead on devising ways in which the two different paradigms can be successfully fused. If for no other reason, there are convincing affective reasons behind making this adjustment. We should not forget that students who come into our classrooms are not only learning a new language, but more than likely a new way of interacting and behaving. In addition to making our expectations as explicit as possible, we should provide students with procedures and activities they are comfortable with so, at the very least, we will be able to

lower potentially disruptive affective barriers that get in the way of the learning process.

Another researcher, Seedhouse (1997) has approached the issue of conflicting perceptions and expectations from a slightly different angle. He urges teachers to guard against the danger of believing that our views of what constitutes a successful or productive lesson will necessarily be seen as such by students. In a study of second language learners in Australia, he demonstrates just how radically students and teachers can differ in this regard. Seedhouse (1997: 340) found that learners most highly valued the two parts of their class that teachers found least important: grammar work and error correction. He goes on to argue, somewhat provocatively perhaps, that it is not the teacher's conception of what is 'meaningful' or 'productive' that matters at all, but whether or not the learners think that any given activity "has a place in the language classroom, and whether it matches their own language learning aims or not" (1997: 340).

Many of us may be unwilling to grant that the student necessarily always knows best, but it is important for us to consider whether the CLT concept of 'learner-centered' education is more accurately described as a teacher's idea of what students would want out of their language class if they only knew better. We should at least determine the extent of the gap in perceptions and expectations that exists in our own classrooms and consider how this gap may be affecting language learning.

## Conclusion

When we consider why CLT has achieved its preeminent status in the language classroom, it is tempting to believe that it is because it has unlocked the secrets of language instruction and acquisition. Unfortunately, even casual observation makes it clear that the quantum leap in a learner's ability to acquire a second language has failed to materialize, and we are still left dealing with the very old problem of so many capable students failing to achieve high levels of proficiency. Frustration and dissatisfaction with the narrower pedagogical focus of the older grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods is a partial explanation for the faith that many of us have placed in the method that replaced them. Also, the work of early researchers connected with CLT such as Hymes (1972) and Krashen (e.g. 1985) is powerful, compelling and instinctively appealing. However, we would do well to remember Jeremy Harmer's (1991: 31) trenchant, if somewhat depressing remark, "No one knows

exactly how people learn languages although a great deal of research has been done into the subject.” In spite of this rather glaring gap in our knowledge, dissenting voices (e.g. Swan, 1985; Beaugrande, 1997) forcefully arguing that the basic tenets of CLT are open to serious question have, until fairly recently, been drowned out by others (for a response to Swan, see Widdowson, 1985). As a result, the last twenty-five years or so in the ESL/EFL field have very much belonged to CLT.

It would seem, however, that the years of general acceptance of CLT claims is now being replaced by a healthy period of reassessment and consolidation. The CLT movement was accurately called a ‘revolution’ at its outset, but its ‘revolutionary’ stage is long over—a state of affairs that should be viewed as both a positive and necessary step forward. Although the bulk of this paper has been devoted to questioning the major assumptions of CLT, I hope that it has also been clear that I am in no way advocating the wholesale abandonment of the approach, and I am certainly not calling for a return to grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods. As lively as the voices dissenting from certain key CLT concepts have become recently, we do not—mercifully—hear the call for a return to the past. Rather, we are now in the middle of the more fruitful process of taking a fresh look at some of the techniques and approaches that we had unfairly rejected to see how they can be reincorporated into our classrooms in new ways. The shrill call for the adoption of yet another new method is conspicuously absent; in its place is the calmer and more reasonable call to reappraise our understanding of an approach we have been working with for over a generation and to adjust our pedagogy in view of this new understanding. Most importantly, this broadening and deepening seen in both theory and methodology will ultimately be of most benefit to our students.

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