

# Examining the cultural appropriateness of the communicative approach to language teaching in Japan

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## Abstract

The communicative approach has been one of the most successful and widely-used second language teaching approaches in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early stages of the twenty-first century. Yet despite its tremendous influence, some have questioned its universal applicability, particularly in Asian learning contexts. Ellis (1996) is one such critic, who argues that the communicative approach ought to be adjusted to fit what he claims are collectivist, form-focussed Asian learning contexts. This paper aimed to evaluate Ellis's (1996) claims, particularly in relation to English language teaching in Japan. In doing so, it was shown that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach adopted by Ellis (1996) in relation to categorising Asian learning contexts is overly simplistic. In fact, despite the prevalence of what he refers to as a content-oriented approach in many formal language learning contexts in Asia, many non-formal learning contexts – such as *eikaiwa* (English conversation classes) in Japan – successfully utilise the communicative approach. Moreover, this paper demonstrated that the notion of Western English teachers acting as 'cultural mediators' in Asian language learning settings is fraught with difficulty. Not only is it problematic trying to isolate what culture or cultures a person is said to represent, but also many Western English teachers teaching in countries such as Japan may not be in a position to truly claim to have an in-depth understanding of the culture in which they find themselves living and working.

*Keywords:* communicative language teaching, communicative competence, EFL, eikaiwa, Japan

## **Introduction**

The emergence of a communicative approach to language teaching during the 1970s, and its subsequent refinement in the succeeding years, has led to new understandings about the learning and teaching of language, and the role of teachers and language learners. However, some writers have challenged the universal applicability of the communicative approach – particularly in Asian learning contexts (Simpson, 2008; Zhang, Li & Wang, 2013). In his article, ‘How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach?’, Ellis questions the universal applicability of a communicative approach to language teaching, in particular in relation to English teaching and learning in East Asia. In order for a communicative approach to work in East Asia, Ellis posits that it ought to be modified to fit Asian cultural norms, and that language teachers in Asia should act as ‘mediators’ to resolve inter-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings in the English classroom (1996, p. 213).

In assessing Ellis’s (1996) claims, this paper will begin by outlining the key tenets of the communicative approach, in particular by exploring the nature of communicative competence. Thereafter, consideration will be given to Ellis’s assertions that the communicative approach’s focus on process over content and its integrative nature make it inappropriate in Asian learning contexts. I will dispute these contentions, arguing that Ellis adopts an over-simplified view of Asian culture and Asian language learners. Ellis’s claim that cultural mediation is the best way to address the perceived shortcomings of the communicative approach in Asia will also be considered, and I

will contend that cultural mediation is inherently problematic and can potentially lead to greater misunderstandings in the learning and teaching environment.

### **An overview of the communicative approach**

At the heart of the communicative approach to language teaching is the notion of ‘communicative competence’, which emerged from the work of Dell Hymes (1972). Hymes (1972) rejected aspects of the naturalist notion of language acquisition posited by Noam Chomsky (1965), and argued for a theory of language competence which incorporates “the language user’s knowledge of (and ability for use of) rules of language use in context.” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 16). So the communicative approach is seen by its proponents as a vehicle for not only enabling language learners to grasp and utilise rules of grammar, but also as a means of allowing those learners to use and adapt their language in a variety of social contexts. Indeed, as Ellis (1996) notes, learners’ ability to use their knowledge of language to communicate in real life situations is a fundamental component of Canale and Swain’s (1980) model of communicative competence. Widdowson (1983) also highlights that underpinning this conceptualisation of communicative competence is a performative component. That is, in order to be deemed communicatively competent, a learner must not only have knowledge of a language, but he or she must also be able to successfully communicate in and through that language.

Canale and Swain (1980) and later Canale (1983) conceptualised communicative competence as comprising four key aspects: (1) knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures, morphology, syntax, and so on (linguistic competence); (2) knowledge of rules and conventions relating to the use of the language in different settings and contexts (sociolinguistic competence); (3) knowledge of strategies (both verbal and non-verbal) for dealing with miscommunications or communication breakdowns

(strategic competence); and (4) knowledge about how language structures can be combined to form a coherent text or utterance (discourse competence).

More recently, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (**CEFR**) has developed a widely used rubric for communicative competence. The CEFR (2001) identifies communicative competence as being made up of (1) linguistic competence (which includes lexical, grammatical, phonological, and orthographic knowledge); (2) sociolinguistic competence (covering such aspects as politeness and appropriateness of language); and (3) pragmatic competence (knowledge about the communicative function of texts and language and the organisation and structure of texts). However, unlike Canale and Swain's (1980) model, strategic competence is a notable absence in the CEFR conception of communicative competence.

Both Canale and Swain's (1980) framework and that adopted by the CEFR are arguably the most widely used and referenced ideations of the communicative approach (Bagarić, V., & Djigunović, 2007). Indeed, they have been at the heart of the communicative approach to language teaching and learning (**CLT**) since it has become widely adopted in English language teaching classrooms from the 1980s until the present day.

Significantly, CLT also represents a shift away from what has been referred to as "teacher-centered instruction" to an approach which focuses more on language learners (both in an individual and collective sense), with the teachers now cast in a facilitative role (Richards, 2006). Thus, under the CLT approach, language learners are in effect given more control over their language learning and ultimately their language acquisition. And although, as Richards notes, "there is no single or agreed upon set of practices that characterize current communicative language teaching" (2006, p. 22) – in other words, it is a broad approach rather than a distinct methodology – it became and

in many respects remains at the forefront of progressive language teaching approaches (Cook, 2003).

### **Culture clash: Does the communicative approach work in Asia?**

Ellis (1996) opines that there are a number of features of the CLT model – in particular, that proposed by Canale & Swain (1980) – which make it impractical in an Asian teaching and learning context. He bases this conclusion on two broad assumptions: firstly, that the process-oriented nature of the CLT approach does not fit with the traditionally content-focused Asian approach to education; and secondly, that the functional aims of the communicative approach (to enable learners to communicate in a second language in a variety of social settings) do not dovetail with the goals and learning environments of Asian learners. I now evaluate both of these assumptions.

#### *Process over content*

Ellis notes that the idea that a sound language teaching approach ought to focus more on the teaching and learning process (rather than the content of what is taught and learned) is a key part of the CLT model. Commenting on the results of his own research in Vietnam, he relayed the account of one Vietnamese English teacher, who stated that the idea of the primacy of process in English language teaching is “a whole new learning experience” (1996, p. 214). Ellis goes on to argue that this process-driven model does not sit well with the ‘collectivist societies’ in Asia, whose focus is more on attaining a command of linguistic forms (1996, p. 215).

In my view, such an outlook towards language education in Asia does not provide a complete picture of the realities of current English language teaching and learning in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia. Although formal, classroom-based English

education in much of Asia was (and, to some extent, still is) largely content-focused, Ellis seems to ignore the large number of English language students in Asia who study English outside a formal school setting. Consider, for example, the vast *eikaiwa* ('English conversation') industry in Japan. Although much of this *eikaiwa* network is based around internationally established English schools, a significant portion of *eikaiwa* teaching takes place in small groups or one-on-one in an informal, non-classroom setting, such as in cafés, in homes, and the like, (Kubota, 2011). These informal *eikaiwa* lessons are by their very nature process-driven – tending to focus primarily on helping students to communicate their ideas and opinions as fluently as possible in English, without explicit attention being paid to form (grammatical structures and so on). Indeed, many *eikaiwa* students view the process of having regular exposure to a native English-speaker in a natural setting (for example, English conversation in a Starbucks's café) as the means by which they will develop their English communicative abilities further.

The same can largely be said of *eikaiwa* businesses too. Much of the learning taking place in these settings is process-oriented, and indeed, like much of the informal *eikaiwa* teaching network mentioned above, is often conducted in small groups or in one-on-one situations, with a heavy emphasis on communicative interaction. So it seems that the 'collectivist societies' tag which Ellis ascribes to Asia (1996, p. 215) is perhaps out of kilter with the modern English education environment throughout much of Asia – and certainly in Japan.

### *The foreign language/second language distinction*

The difference between learning English in a non-English speaking country (English as a Foreign Language (EFL)) and studying English in a country where English is an established first language (English as a Second Language (ESL)) is also addressed by

Ellis. In the ESL context, Ellis notes that learning is predicated on the notion that the student is aiming to develop communicative competence in order to play a part in the English-speaking community surrounding them. In such situations, Ellis asserts that the teacher's role is primarily facilitative. However, for EFL learners, Ellis (1996, p. 215) states, "EFL ... is always a cultural island, and the EFL teacher is cast in the somewhat onerous role of sole provider of experience in the target language." In addressing this important distinction, Ellis argues that the CLT approach (and the importance which it places on oral communication) may not work in an Asian setting, where curricula – and ultimately school and university entrance examinations – may not test communicative competence and spoken English skills.

The argument Ellis makes here is in some respects compelling – if perhaps overly-generalised. Certainly in Japan, formal English education in many junior and senior high schools is geared towards enabling students to be prepared for and to pass university entrance examinations (Geluso, 2013; Mathieson, 2015). And university entrance examinations in Japan currently do not test oral English communication skills – their focus is primarily on textual comprehension, listening skills and translation. Accordingly, as Ellis (1996, p. 215) states, in such an environment, a CLT approach may indeed be doing students a "disservice".

However, this once again is perhaps too narrow a description of the education environment in Asia. English language students in many parts of Asia (particularly adult learners) have various motivations for and goals related to studying English, including for travelling, doing business with overseas companies, and the like. To be sure, passing university entrance examinations is one such motivating factor, but principally for young learners. Moreover, change is in the air – the National Center Test for University Admission in Japan will include a spoken testing component from 2020 onwards (McCrostie, 2017). This is no doubt in part due to the increased

importance that is being placed on communicative English (and particularly spoken English) in the globally interconnected world in which English remains the lingua franca. Furthermore, thanks to the wonders of the Internet and social media, most learners in Japan and elsewhere in Asia now have multiple – indeed seemingly endless – opportunities to experience other cultures through English. Far from a cultural island, EFL is perhaps nowadays more of a cultural theme park.

### **Cultural mediation**

Underscoring his concerns about the suitability of the CLT approach in Asia is Ellis's contention that differences in cultural backgrounds between the foreign teacher and the Asian learner can lead to misunderstandings in the classroom. He comments thus:

In the confusion between Eastern and Western world-views, it is quite natural to fall into the trap of assigning one's own hierarchy of goals and value orientations to our counterparts from the other culture. (1996, p. 216)

As a way of remedying this perceived limitation in communicative efficacy between cultures, Ellis draws on the work of, among others, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1983). They advocate a kind of intercultural communicative approach, whereby aspects of both cultures are drawn on and combined to engender communicative competence. Ellis suggests that an optimal approach for Western teachers in an Asian setting is to act as a "cultural mediator" (1996, p. 217). He points out that this role is essentially twofold. Firstly, the teacher should seek points of overlap between the two cultures. Secondly, the role of cultural mediator envisages empathy with the students' plight – in particular, "the 'mediating' person who has benefitted from extensive intercultural communication often possesses an accepting and affirmative attitude toward cultural differences". (1996, p. 217)



Negotiating cross-cultural differences in relation to language teaching is certainly a difficult proposition, particularly where the cultural differences often seem so stark (as is perhaps the case between many aspects of Western and Asian cultures). And although Ellis's notion of the teacher as a cultural mediator is in some sense a realistic means for bridging these cultural gaps, in this writer's view it is inherently problematic.

Ellis seems to place Western language teachers in the role of intercultural maven, and assumes a great wealth of experience in intercultural communication on their part. However, in this writer's experience, this is often quite far from reality. Many Western teachers here in Japan arrive with little or no teaching experience, and often with limited experience in relation to other cultures (Geluso, 2013). Far from having benefitted from "extensive intercultural communication" (Ellis, 1996, p. 217), such teachers are, for the most part, only beginning to explore the complexities of intercultural communication. Furthermore, Ellis's cultural mediator ideal also seems to presuppose significant knowledge of the cultural climate within which they are teaching. And although this may be true for many expatriate Westerners who have lived in Japan or other Asian countries for many years, it is perhaps not something that could be said for the majority of young, inexperienced Western teachers in Asia.

Finally, at a broader level, Ellis's cultural mediation 'solution' is, in this author's view, subject to the same limitations as the 'problem' which it is trying to remedy. Part of the problem stems from the very notion of culture itself, which, as Ochs (2002) has noted, is inherently difficult to analyse. In the same way that Ellis, in this writer's view, misleadingly speaks of a collectivist Asian culture (as was discussed earlier), he also speaks of a generic Western culture, from which the CLT approach is said to have developed. However, identifying and defining 'Western' culture is an almost impossible task. And, as Damen (2003, p. 81) notes, "describing cultural similarities

and differences in group terms ... implies that there are no exceptions and effectively hides the individual trees in the forest.”

## Conclusion

The CLT model is perhaps not a universally applicable model of language teaching. It may not, for instance, accord with some highly formal learning environments in Asia, where students’ learning goals are often dictated by external factors such as university entrance requirements. However, this paper has shown that it can and indeed does work in various Asian learning contexts. Indeed, many eikaiwa students here in Japan are engaged in and benefit from a communicative approach, and the process of communicating with native and non-native English teachers in an informal setting gives them a great deal of control over how they learn English.

Furthermore, although our own cultural background clearly plays some role in how we communicate, attempting to mediate between competing cultural ideals (as Ellis suggests) is not only a highly complex task, but is also perhaps too much to expect of many of the young, relatively inexperienced English teachers living and working in Japan and other Asian countries. And ultimately, cultural mediation can, in this writer’s view, lead to more confusion and misunderstanding among both teachers and students in the classroom – one of the very things that the CLT approach seeks to avoid.

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