

# Does it Work? Implementing Communicative Language Teaching Approach in EFL Context

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## Abstract

Language teaching is a dynamic field of education where a cluster of changes have been suggested and implemented over time. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been regarded as a harbinger of new era in language teaching. Initiated in the inner circle countries, its effects have now reached to the extreme outer circle countries. Yet, how far CLT approach is beneficial in English as a foreign language (EFL) context is still shrouded in mystery. This is a review article with an attempt to evaluate the feasibility of applying CLT approach in EFL context. To reach a final consideration, it will first explore the characteristics of CLT approach. Then it will analyze some of the prevailing empirical studies in pursuit of applying CLT approach in EFL countries. Finally, it will suggest some remedies to avoid the hurdles in its implementation in EFL context.

**Key words:** Language teaching, Communicative approach, EFL context

## 1. Introduction

The central concern of applied linguistics for the past 50 years has been on the structure of language; it is not surprising then that the emphasis in L2 teaching has also been on the mastery of the structures of language (Spada, 2006). CLT was introduced in revolt against Audio-lingual method. Its development can be traced in Europe and North America where a large number of immigrants, international workers and an exceptional British linguistic and social behavior made the Council of Europe think to prepare a syllabus for second language learners which should be based on notional-functional, meaning-potential and situational-context use of target language (Savignon, 2007). Communicative needs of the learners were given priority in the target language instructional program.

Hymes (1971) a North American scholar forwarded the theoretical foundation of CLT. He urged that the knowledge of language does not only mean the knowledge of grammatical rules, i.e. Linguistic competence, but rather the knowledge how to use the language, i.e. Communicative competence. This idea gave new heights to the ELT in 1970s. Hymes' notion of the use of language was striking on Chomsky's (1957) definition of language which highlighted the mastery of linguistic competence. This reaction discarded the idea of an 'ideal native speaker'. Now the focus of applied linguistics was not only on the language learning but also language as a social behavior. Communicative competence of the second language learner became the core interest for the language instructors. His concern with the speech community, and an integration of culture, language and communication was in accordance with Halliday's (1973) 'meaning potential' use of language in the British language tradition. Hymes' ideology opened a new way for the language scholars and as a result, a number of methods were proposed to make his stance on communicative competence valid (Bachman & Palmer 1981, Canale & Swaine 1980, Harley & Swaine 1984). The purpose of these models was to prove that language competence is not simply linguistic competence, i.e. grammar, vocabulary and phonology but also pragmatics, social context and strategic awareness. Hence, it was recommended that L2 instruction should include all these components. The learners' needs of the use of language became priority for the instructor. Oprandy (1999:44, as cited in Jacobs and Farrell, 2003) wrote that,

*The communicative approach requires a complexity in terms of planning and a tolerance for messiness and ambiguity as teachers analyze students' needs and design meaningful tasks to meet those needs. The past solutions and deductive stances of audio-lingual materials and pedagogy, like the grammar-translation tests and syllabi preceding them, are no longer seen as sensitive to students' needs and interests. Nor are they viewed as respectful of students' intelligence to figure things out inductively through engaging problem solving and communicative tasks.*

CLT has been derived from multidisciplinary practices that involve psychology, linguistics, sociology, educational and philosophical research which has remained a topic of hot debate for the language teachers, linguists and researchers. The primary concern from the very beginning of CLT has remained to elaborate and

implement methodologies which can promote the use of functional language through participation in communicative episodes. An international and multicultural language context demands to develop a multi-faceted language learning program leading to diverse socio-political contexts. Diversity in language needs demand for the diverse language instructional strategies. 'The selection of methods and materials appropriate to both goals and the context of teaching begin with an analysis of learners' needs and styles of learning, socially defined' (Savignon, 2007). Actually what CLT is, how it is implemented in real class room situation and what characteristics of language should be emphasized has made the phenomenon a bit suspicious and complex for the educators as there had been a difference of opinion about this issue. Many definitions include meaningful communication and message conveying in CLT. The practice of language form is another important issue for some scholars and educators. Some arguments go to this extreme as to whether or not include other literacy skills in CLT like the use of L1, teaching of grammar and vocabulary. All these issues have made CLT somewhat problematic for the teachers. The difference of opinion and polarity arguments while interpreting the original meaning of CLT has made its implementation difficult. Indeed, CLT in this modern time has reached on a turning point. Many educators and linguists have urged to include language form and structure to make CLT approach more meaning-oriented for L2 instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Williams, 1995). The weak and strong version of CLT approach is another issue which has invited the attention of many scholars. It argues the difference of "learning to use English" and "using English to learn it". According to Howatt (1984), 'the weak version of CLT stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use the target language for communication purpose and attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching. The strong version of CLT is that language is acquired through communication'. For a better understanding, first we need to analyze the hypothetical L2 learning. Then, some of the major characteristics of CLT approach will be discussed.

### *1.1 Two related hypotheses of L2 learning*

The period from 1980 played very important role in clarifying L2 learning and shaping CLT approach. In North America, many scholars built hypotheses about L2 learning and suggested models for teaching and learning L2 through CLT approach. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis are significant in this area:

#### *1.1.1 Krashen's Input Hypothesis*

Krashen(1982) observed that L1 acquisition and L2 learning have almost same characteristics for the learner in learning grammar and phonological features of language. Although, he also pointed out that L1 acquisition by the speakers is more successful as compared to L2 learning. The reason for this, as he told, while acquiring L1 the learner does not encounter correction by others and he acquires structure and grammatical rules in a natural atmosphere during this process. While the L2 learner is taught grammar and given feedback in form of correction. This situation hampers the natural process of leaning. Eventually, he forwarded his hypothesis that if the Input conditions are similar in L1 acquisition and L2 learning, L2 learning will be complete and successful like that of L1. Thus Krashen proposed that the learner should be exposed to maximum meaningful input. As a result, the learner will integrate input into his inter-language system and learn L2 the same way as a child acquires L1. Krashen's Input hypothesis is influential in shaping CLT.

#### *1.1.2 Long's Interaction Hypothesis*

Krashen's Input theory got universal acclaim. Another group of researchers was interested in knowing that how input becomes comprehensible for the learner. Long (1983) forwarded his hypothesis that conventional variety of language (greetings, making requests and apologizes, negotiations, etc) make input comprehensible for the learners which as a result, develops L2. Hatch. E (1978) had already claimed that while learning L2, the learner needs not to learn grammatical rules; he will learn these rules through interaction. The L2 educators thus believed that giving maximum opportunities to the learner to engage into interaction will be sufficient to successfully learn L2. The effect of these two hypotheses is considered to pave way for the successful model of CLT. Both of these emphasized an instruction without form, i.e. grammar, and feedback.

## **2. The characteristics of CLT Approach**

As the history of CLT is not new, many notions evolved with the passage of time which indeed provided foundation for CLT (Johnstone, 1999; Thompson, 1996). These notions vary with the teachers' implementation of CLT in real class room situation. Some of these notions are as follows:

### *2.1 Meaning-based learning*

A meaning-based modal of learning target language in CLT while totally neglecting the form of language is a major misconception in the minds of many educators. This idea, indeed, does not match with the modern linguists, especially those belonging to Britain, who all the way towards the development of CLT have claimed the form of language as an integral part of it. May be this misinterpretation arose when many teachers learnt Prabhu (1987) saying that grammar is too difficult and complex to learn and teach. Krashen (1982) had also

claimed that grammar rules in L2 cannot be learnt fully on conscious level, it is possible only through large-scale exposure to L2. Research, however indicates that to neglect the form of language is harmful. Students many times fail to grasp the development of language and accuracy (Harley & Swain, 1984; Spada & Lightbown, 1989). Observational and experimental research indicates that attention to the form of language in CLT with primary focus on meaning-oriented communication is important (Lyster, 2004). Research on CLT has also shown that a type of form-focused teaching in L2 class room improves students' communicative ability and their knowledge of language (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Since 1980s, the educationists have developed practical notions about the implementation of CLT in L2 class room. They emphasize a balance between structural form and meaning-based modal of instruction in target language. According to cognitive psychologists, we learn the best while connecting and storing information in chunks which leads to long term memory. 'Language is a system for the expression of meaning' (Richards and Rodgers, 2006). Meaningful communication provides purpose for learning a second/foreign language. Though, a meaning-based L2 instruction is the core idea, yet a focus on form is also not negligible (Samuda, 2001).

### 2.2 Variation in CLT

Variation in accordance with class room situation, educational goals, political and social structure, etc is a matter of concern for CLT implementation. It differentiated between content-based, task-based and participatory-based learning of target language. Theoretically, they may be different, but they have some elements in common, like meaning-based teaching and learner-centered approach of teaching which makes them the members of CLT family. The distinctive point between them is the 'content' of teaching instead of 'methodology'. For instance, in content-based teaching, the students learn English when they learn other subjects like geography or history, etc., which are taught in English language. Krashen claimed this type of learning as 'CLT par excellence' as the emphasis is on specific needs of the learners. The diversity in learners can be in terms of religious or social group, mother language, gender, intelligence and achievement levels, learning styles, etc. A student-centered learning demands to consider these differences as a plus point, not an obstacle. While in task-based teaching, the students are engaged in solving problems and tasks which help them acquire target language. It is assumed that under this process, the learners will avail maximum interaction in the target language which facilitates them acquire mastery on L2 (Long & Crookes, 1992). In participatory-based teaching the contents of teaching are taken from the political or social field of life (Auerbach, 1992).

### 2.3 Post-method teaching

Larsen-Freeman (2000) has defined 14 methods of target language teaching. She made clear distinctions between all methodologies. CLT in Larsen-Freeman has been defined as an approach to target language teaching with a focus on functional use of language. However, she does not include task-based, participatory-based and content-based L2 teaching in the CLT approach. This has made the situation a bit complex for the implementation of CLT. Indeed, CLT has gradually proved a cover-term for many L2 implementation techniques. It is this confusion which even moved some researchers argue to shun CLT, and also the universal concept of 'methodology'. Stern (1983) was the first to express a disregard for the term 'method'. He argued that, 'The net effect of different approaches to teaching is now no longer conceptualized in terms of a single undifferentiated methodological prescription. Language teaching theorists now shun the simple formula'.

Kumaravadivelu (1994) is another scholar who, while strengthening the idea of Stern (1983), argued that the second language teaching is on a turning point where theoretical knowledge, empirical research and pedagogical practice is too complex to be covered in 'method'. This has led him to claim this era as a 'post-method era' of teaching language. Another argument in its favor has been forwarded by Larsen Freeman (2000) who claims that method should not strictly be thought as teaching practices and classroom behavior, and a set of rules which the teacher must follow. They are rather 'to expand a teacher's repertoire of techniques'. It also argues that the teacher should have a choice in the implementation in real class room situations (Freeman & Richardson, 1993). Still another argument in this regard has been given by Celce Murcia and Dornyei (1997) that 'CLT is a general approach rather than a specific method'. This is also in consistence with that of Savignon's (1997) that 'CLT is a philosophy of language teaching, not only a method'.

### 2.4 Place of grammar in CLT

Hot debates and discussions about CLT many times have led to question the importance of studying grammar in target language teaching. The major focus on meaning in CLT gives impression to some educators that grammar is less important for the second language learners. More so, the learners' ability to express themselves in CLT calls for a disregard to form or grammar. In deed, the development of language is the core interest of CLT, which is impossible without attention to form and grammar because no communication is possible without a shared set of assumptions about language between the participants (Savignon, 2007). Canale and Swain (1980) too, did not advocate to a wholesome neglect of grammar. They rather placed grammatical competence in a broader concept of communicative competence. Likewise, Savignon (2007) urged that the language teachers should not neglect grammar. Sometimes, in the language laboratories, structural drills with a focus on self expressive meaning have

been found effective to improve communicative competence.

### 2.5 *CLT--learner centered teaching*

The most common theme of CLT is that it is learner-centered teaching. The communicative needs of the learners provide basis for decision making about CLT program. Globally recognized functional language goals call for the quality of speech rather than the quantitative assessment of the learners' linguistic competence; though a controversy over appropriate language assessment still persists. The latest trends in educational reforms advocate class-presentations, essay writing and some other forms of assessment of the learners' communicative competence. Some argue portfolio assessment of the learners' poems, stories, narrative accounts to encourage achievement. The learners are given opportunity to decide about course contents (Breen & Candlin, 1980). It leads towards more autonomous opportunities for the learners (Spada, 1987). Some educationists go so far in saying that CLT is not only learner-centered but rather learner-directed model of teaching. However, learner-centered activities are one of the basic components of CLT. Group activities, especially in case of adult learners, make way to produce a large variety of interactions and 'although learners cannot provide each other with the accurate grammatical and sociolinguistic input that native speakers can, they can offer each other genuine communication practice, including the negotiation for meaning that is believed to aid L2 acquisition' (Spada, 2007). Learner's autonomy makes him/her responsible not only for his/her own learning rather those also with whom he/she interacts. This kind of collaborative learning with peers reduces learner's dependence on teacher. Likewise self assessment also promotes learning. The learners judge the quality of their work and assess their weaknesses. This process guides them move forward instead of waiting for external evaluation to gear their learning.

### 2.6 *Which language skills to emphasize?*

In Audio-Lingual method, primary importance is given to listening and speaking which lead to assume that it will automatically improve reading and writing (Lado, 1964). However, in CLT many researchers argue that linguistic skills, i.e. form of language should not be separated from communicative competence which means that all the four basic language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing are included in CLT (savignon, 1997). Further elaboration of this idea can be traced in Widdowson (1990, as quoted in Spada, 2007), 'what the learners need to know how to do is to compose the act of writing, comprehend in the act of reading, and to learn techniques of reading by writing and techniques of writing by reading'. Hence, comprehension of language (listening and reading) and production of language (speaking and writing) are all the fundamentals of CLT practice.

### 2.7 *Interference of L1 in CLT*

In the direct method, L1 interference is strictly prohibited. The same situation we find in audio-lingual method and CLT. It is because L1 interference is considered to influence negatively the acquisition of L2. The learners should be exposed to the target language. However, many linguists have also favored the use of L1 in L2 class room with a claim that the knowledge of L1 provides formal and structural foundation for L2 in the learners mind (Vygotsky, 1978). They further argue that L1 helps in achieving linguistic goals and the learners achieve the target language in the process of comparing and contrasting with L1. Despite all these arguments, the use of L1 should be allowed carefully in L2 classroom.

### 2.8 *Feedback in CLT*

In CLT, some educators consider corrective feedback harmful (Truscott, 1999), while some others advocate the use of feedback (Lyster, 2004). Many teachers believe that errors are an evidence of the progress in L2 acquisition. It is believed that during this process, the students' errors will be minimized and eventually, take the form of target language. However, a balanced way has been proposed, for example by Panova (1999), who suggests an indirect feedback without interruption in conversation with the learner, in the shape of reformation of his faulty utterances. For example, if the student says, 'His shoes is old' the teacher should say, 'yes, his shoes are old—he bought five years ago'. This kind of indirect feedback will not hamper the discussion, at the same time giving him a clue for further conversation.

## 3. **Applying Communicative Approach in EFL Context**

'As a language teaching approach originated and nurtured in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts, how appropriate CLT is, and, how can it be implemented to maximize its strengths and benefits for EFL learners' (Wei, 2011) are the issues of interest for the researchers and language instructors today. From the beginning, the proponents of CLT have claimed to prove its effectiveness in ELT. Chowdhry (2010) wrote that 'When CLT was introduced across Europe, the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in which it would inevitably be applied was not considered'. Likewise, Ramanathan (1999) asserted that 'The much professed and popular theories devised in the inner-circle of countries may or may not be compatible with the teaching conditions in the outer-circle countries'. CLT is a highly westernized approach of language teaching, alien to the local-approved teacher-centered approach in the EFL countries. EFL necessarily includes multi cultural aspects which must

consider local demands and socio economic situations. With globalization, as mentioned earlier, the ‘ideal native speaker’ idea is on rapid decline. English language is required to serve the motto of non native speakers, now outnumber native speakers. Wei (2011) wrote that,

*Given the gap between the theories of communicative competence and the task confronting EFL teaching and learning, most of the previous research studies maintained that EFL countries should carefully study their English teaching situations and decide how CLT can best serve their needs and interests.*

Many empirical studies conducted to assess the feasibility of applying CLT approach in EFL context identified grammar-based examinations, larger class size, and, lack of experience in using authentic language on the part of teachers hurdles in using CLT approach. A study on English teachers’ perceptions in adopting CLT approach in South Korea recommended that South Korea needs to change the fundamental approach to education for adopting CLT approach because, as Li (1998) wrote that, ‘The predominance of text-centered and grammar-centered practices in Korea does not provide a basis for the student-centered, fluency-focused, and problem-solving activities required by CLT’ (as mentioned in Wei, 2011). Vasilopoulos (2008) also wrote that,

*Many years have passed since the introduction of CLT approach in Korea, however despite curriculum reform and passage of time, many remain skeptical of the effectiveness of communicative methodology in the Korean English language class room.*

In deed, it has been a general phenomenon for all the EFL countries in which ‘many teachers have tried to change the dominant teaching procedures but quickly get frustrated, lose their initial enthusiasm, and acquiesce to tradition’ (Campbell & Zhao, 1993). In Bangladesh context, Chowdhry (2010) wrote that,

*In Bangladesh, students expect teachers to be authority figures and the teaching methods to conform to the traditional ‘lock-step’ teacher centered approach where teacher gives orders to students, who then comply... In the pre university year, students are not exposed to skills development course. Hence, the more communicative approach... seems to them foreign. Students feel tempted to discard the new style and complain that the teacher is not teaching ...They knew their status and role had suddenly been violated by something new. They are no longer familiar with the rules of this new game.*

In China too, the introduction of CLT approach in teaching English suffered much. Hird (1995) writes (as cited by Liao, 2000) that,

*The teachers believed that it was not feasible to adopt CLT because China had its special characteristics. These characteristics included the teachers’ inability to teach communicatively and grammar focused examination pressure...And may be that is just as well because China is a vastly different English language teaching environment from the one that spawned and nurtured the communicative approach.*

The government’s policy on education in China had a special focus on improving students’ communicative competence. Hu, 2005 (as quoted in Wenjie, 2009) reported that,

*Despite a lack of consensus among researchers regarding the appropriateness of CLT for China, the Ministry of Education was impressed by the high profile that the methodology enjoyed internationally and was convinced that it would provide the best solution for the wide spread problem of students’ low competence in using English for communication even after years of formal instruction in the language.*

(Liao, 2000) also wrote that,

*Opponents of CLT held that CLT was neither possible nor feasible in China...Proponents believed that there was indeed a possibility and feasibility of using CLT if there was a sweeping change of curriculum. The SEDC (State Education Development Commission) supported the proponents’ view and took some measures to ensure that CLT was used effectively.*

In short, the results of the prevalent empirical research in a quest to gauge the feasibility of applying CLT approach in the EFL countries reveal that almost the same kind of difficulties are being faced by the English language instructors, such as centralized education system, grammar-based exams, larger class size, lack of teachers’ training, non-availability of the authentic teaching material, and, lack of motivation on the part of teachers and students. For the implementation of CLT approach, to begin with, we can urge to the English language teachers that English should be the exclusive language of the class room activities and no mother tongue interference should be allowed. Students’ active participation in class room activities should be ensured and they should be motivated to speak English in class room. They should not act as passive followers of teacher or text books. The teacher should create such situations in the class room which encourage students to express themselves freely either via writing or speaking.

#### **4. Suggestions**

Many educators came to believe that an attention to language form in CLT activities will make learners use them on later stage. Some others, however, fear that if the learner’s attention is diverted to form of language, his

motivation for the use of language may decrease. While the cognitive psychology indicates that we best remember the form of language when recall the context in which we learnt it (Lightbown & Spada 1999). The research on CLT indicates to adopt a balanced view. But what that balance is, is still to maintain by the practitioners. Actually, CLT as a term refers mainly to both (i) processes, and (ii) goals in a class room setting. The basic concept is to improve communicative competence of the learners.

Form-focused language instruction and meaning-based language instruction are still a matter of great concern for the new researchers in the field of language teaching and applied linguistics. An appropriate combination of these two forms mainly depend on the learners' age, educational goals, environment and opportunities of the use of language outside class room, teacher's readiness, the nature or length of class room instruction, etc. Educators, however, have been found convinced to integrate form focused and meaning based exercises for developing communicative competence. The teaching of grammar is crucial up to some extent if the learners have to relate their communicative needs with experience. Liao (2000) quotes the instructions given by State Education Development Council, China (in English Teaching Syllabus, 1992) to the English language teachers for implementing CLT approach in classroom instruction:

- *Teaching should start with listening and speaking.*
- *Drills on language form should not be excessive.*
- *English should be used in class.*
- *Use of translation should be limited.*
- *Audio-visual aids like realia, pictures, over-head transparencies, audio-tapes, videos, and computers should be fully utilized.*
- *The teacher's role should be a facilitator and helper to guide students to develop effective learning habits.*
- *Teachers should be aware of the individual differences among students in the learning process.*
- *Appropriate encouragement should be given to students to reinforce their initiatives.*

'Lots of work needs to be done by EFL teachers and researchers on how to minimize the mismatches arising in the transfer of contexts and adapt CLT to benefit EFL learners as much as possible (Savignon, 2007)'. The researchers and practitioners suggested that there must be a link between what learners learn in class room with their real life needs. Flexibility in teachers choice of methodology according to learners' needs is crucial in making language learning effective. Jilani (2004) asserted that,

*It should be kept in mind that English language teachers must be prudent and eclectic in designing a lesson plan, paying close attention to a wide range of methods and techniques that are at their disposal, and in selecting appropriate pedagogical tools that are congruent with the linguistic needs of their students.*

A balanced approach in teaching target language is the most favored notion under CLT implementation. Spada (2007) argues that: '(In CLT) the inclusion of form-focused instruction is needed with exclusively meaning based approaches to CLT if the learners are to develop higher levels of knowledge and performance in the target language'. However, there is still confusion as to when the learners should attend to language form in L2 learning. Spada's argument is consistent with that of Johnson (1982) who wrote that in CLT 'the separationist position seems to imply a divorce of form and use, whereas in the unificationist, the divorce of form and use is seen as undesirable and probably also untenable on linguistic and psycholinguistic grounds'.

## 5. Conclusion

CLT approach has now reached on a turning point. A meaning potential model of language teaching with a combination of form-focused instruction has been suggested by the modern researchers (Spada 2007, Savignon 2007, Larsen-Freeman 2000). Learners' autonomy in suggesting classroom instruction and self assessment of their progress have been advocated in the contemporary literature on language teaching instruction. A balanced emphasis on all language skills is desirable in improving learners' communicative competence. Variation in class room instruction keeping in view the students' needs has made the language teachers' job more dynamic than before. Teachers' role in selecting instructional strategies has been reported as crucial in the implementation of CLT approach and bridging the gap between theory and practice. The application of CLT approach in EFL context is, however, complex. The prevalent empirical research demands to do more in covering mismatches in the theory of CLT approach and the contexts of teaching.

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