

# Communicative Language Teaching for Young Learners of English: A Critical Perspective

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## Abstract

It is generally believed that the goal of English language learning is to develop communication skills, and to accomplish this communicative approaches to language teaching are widely advocated. However, it is not clear whether approaches to communicative language teaching (CLT) used for adult learners are suitable for younger learners of English. Therefore, this paper seeks to critically examine communicative language teaching with the intent to identify appropriate classroom practice for young learners. CLT aims to develop communicative competence by extensive use and practice of the target language in the learning process, frequently in situational contexts. A major criticism of such an approach is that the communicative competence attained can, by the very nature of the classroom, be described as decontextualized and fixed in nature. Furthermore, a social constructivist perspective informs that for truly effective communicative competence to be achieved the learning process needs to incorporate social and cultural aspects of interaction. The social and cultural world of the young learner is a very different one from that of the adolescent and adult learner, a difference with important implications. For children play occupies a pivotal role in the learning process and language development. Consequently, our perceptions of the learning process and what is an appropriate methodology for the young learner may need to be re-examined. Caution is required in the adoption of tasks and activities as notions of communication and principles of CLT such as authenticity and functional use of English may require re-conceptualization for young learners. The paper concludes that in order to build a model of child foreign language communication and appropriate approaches to learning/teaching, it is required to provide descriptions of language use in both the classroom and outside the classroom that reflect the realities of the child's world and language learning.

*Keywords:* Communicative language teaching, Young learners' EFL,  
Play, Social constructivism

## Introduction

In 2013 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced a series of reforms intended to strengthen the English language ability of Japanese students. The reforms reflect concerns over current standards of English language attainment and a growing awareness of the need for Japan to more effectively respond to the pressures of globalization. More immediately, they give recognition to a need to prepare for the forthcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Thus, the reforms also aim to strengthen pupils' awareness of Japanese culture and their ability to explain and promote Japan and its culture through intercultural exchange and volunteer activities. That is, in addition to the intent to raise levels of English language ability, there is a clear emphasis in the reforms upon a need to raise pupils' awareness of their Japanese identity (2013, MEXT).

The reforms affect all levels of the school curriculum, from elementary school to senior high school. Throughout, the common goal is to develop communication abilities, that is, to enable students to function in English rather than primarily accumulate knowledge of the language. Under the current curriculum, English is not recognized as a 'subject' at the primary level though English activities begin in Grade 5. Following the reforms activity-based classes will take place once or twice a week beginning in the third grade. Reading and writing are excluded. The aim is to lay a foundation for the subsequent development of communication skills. In the fifth and sixth grades, English is to be taught as an official subject three times a week, the aim being to foster an elementary command of English. Reading and writing are included in the curriculum.

In order to achieve the goal of raising communication abilities, MEXT expects teachers to make use of communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology. However, as reported by Butler Goto (2006), the conducting of communicative lessons is not easily accomplished in the Japanese primary classroom owing to a variety of factors, the most prominent of which are difficulty in understanding the concept of CLT, local culture, and class size. That is, whatever the desires of MEXT, the reality of the Japanese primary classroom may present serious obstacles to the achievement of the Ministry's primary goal, that of improving communication skills. Consequently, it is this author's view that, in order to successfully implement MEXT's plans for primary English, it is necessary to examine what form of CLT would be suitable for the Japanese primary classroom. So far little research has been conducted worldwide with regard to CLT

at the primary level, very little indeed in Japan itself. Accordingly, this paper aims to critically examine CLT for Japanese primary learners of English.

## Communicative Language Teaching

CLT represents a unified theoretical perspective about the nature of language, and language teaching and learning, which emerged around 1970 when the effectiveness of then dominant traditional approaches was increasingly called into question. Of the several theoretical influences on CLT in those early stages of development the contributions of functional linguistics (Halliday, 1973), notional/functional syllabus design (Wilkins, 1976), and the construct of communicative competence advocated by Hymes (1972) were pivotal. It was Hymes who argued that knowledge of language consists of not only knowledge of the rules of grammar but also knowledge of the rules of language use. Later influences include comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) and interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983, 1996). Today, not surprisingly given the multiple influences and long gestation period of CLT, there are a number of interpretations available to the teacher and researcher. Brown (2007) attempts to provide a clearer understanding amidst this diversity. Through a review of earlier works (Savignon, 1983; Breen & Candline, 1980; Widdowson, 1978) and more recent works (Savignon, 2005; Ellis 2005; Nunan, 2004; Brown 2001) the following characteristics are identified:

1. Classroom goals are focused on all the components of CC and not restricted to grammatical and linguistic competence.
2. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.
3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.
4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. (p. 241)

In summary, CLT can be said to have two core concerns. The first of these is the concept of communication (the goal) itself, how this is to be interpreted and understood. The second relates to how communication as process should inform language teaching/methodology, the implications for classroom practice.

## Communicative Competence: Goal

CLT was an innovation, one welcomed and widely adopted. Consequently, it has impinged on English language teaching and classroom practice worldwide. However, like all radical changes to established practice, it has not been plain sailing and there remain difficulties in conceptualisation and application. Discussion firstly centres on the concept itself, the notion of communicative competence (CC). It is alright for Ministries of education, schools, academics and teachers to state that in advocating and adopting CLT their intention is to develop the learner's CC, but they then also need to state clearly, or at least have in mind, a clear understanding of just what it is they are trying to pursue and hopefully communicate that understanding to all involved.

Perhaps the most widely recognised and influential definition of CC is that provided by Canale and Swain (1980) who suggest that CC consists of grammar, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. By highlighting these four features of CC, Canale and Swain rightly draw our attention to the very complex nature of language learning and language use, the need for speakers to draw on a range of competencies in the communicative process. However, it is this complexity that also calls into question the value of the concept of CC. Stelma (2010) argues that CC is 'wrong' because the constructs of CC are assumed to be stable and context-free in nature. Referring to Lee (2006), Stelma further contends that communicative competence (is) "abstracting complex realities of language use across a range of variation and situational contingency" (Lee, 2006, p.351). In reality, there exists variability in communication in different situations and cultures where different social and cultural conventions have different forms of language use. Accordingly, the definition of communication competence should vary reflecting differences according to the society, context and culture.

Further argument is posed from a social constructivist' perspective. It is pointed out that communicative competence focuses exclusively on a single individual's contribution to communication. Accordingly to Jacoby & Ochs (1995), abilities, actions, and activities do not belong to the individual but are jointly constructed in a discursive process by all participants. Additionally, participants' knowledge and interactional skills are local and specific to that practice and apply to certain specific practices, emphasizing "a shared internal context or 'sphere of inter-subjectivity'" (Kramsch, 1986 p.367). Reflecting these views, the concept of interactional competence (IC) was proposed by Kramsch (1986). From such a conceptual viewpoint, CC is unable to explain variation in an individual speaker's performance from one discursive practice to another. It is a weakness that calls for

greater insight into social and cultural influences on the communicative process, a need for a descriptive framework of the socio-cultural characteristics of discursive practices and the interactional processes by which discursive practices are co-constructed by participants so that we might better understand what is required in order for appropriate and effective communication to occur.

This resonates with Leung's (2005) suggestion to return to the ethnographic basis of Hymes' (1972) original notion of CC, arguing that language education should be based on a description of 'the socially dynamic uses of English and continually re-work the contextual meaning of the concept' (Leung, 2005, p.138). Hymes was originally interested in what types and patterns of communication occur in specific contexts. Such an understanding of CC has important consequences for CLT. If language use is indeed situated, then the abstracted contexts and idealized social rules of language use based on native-speaker usage as suggested by CC and adopted in a CLT approach to the classroom might be deemed to be inappropriate. As Watson-Gegeo & Nielson suggest, "the concept of language socialization in SLA is of paramount importance in researching language acquisition", requiring "an understanding of the cognitive, cultural, social and political complexity of language learning" (2003, p.155).

Turning to Japan context, one of the objectives of the current curriculum for elementary English activities is to form a foundation for pupils' communication abilities (MEXT, 2010). The recently announced educational reform (MEXT, 2013) also aims at nurturing pupils' communication abilities to live in an increasingly globalized community. With the idea of an increasingly globalised community in mind, if young learner success is reframed as the development of intercultural communicative competence and increased participation in sociocultural activities, focus within the classroom might more appropriately be given to interactive communication within a sociocultural identity. Accordingly, more stress can be placed on the social and cultural aspects of what it means to communicate in L2 with less stress on structural aspects of communication. Thus, in order to construct a model of competence that might be successfully employed in the classroom, one appropriate for young learners of English, it would appear necessary to determine, describe and teach what is socially feasible and appropriate for young learners of English.

Young learners in Japan are situated in a different reality from adult language users for whom the notion of CC was originally devised. They live in a different culture and society from native-speaker children, European children, and other Asian children. Japanese children are expected to function in different cultural and social contexts. To make the matter more complicated, society and technology are

rapidly changing and accordingly communication is changing, with the idea of competency seemingly in flux. This does not mean, however, that we should not attempt to clarify or even define the notion of CC for the young learner. Indeed, given the attention of educational systems worldwide to English for young learners in recent years, there is a very definite need to do so.

Descriptions of the features of English as a Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2000, 2003; 2002; Seidlhofer, 2004) are widely acknowledged and accepted. These provide appropriate guidance for all involved in English language education and the adult learner, the ultimate goal being the successful adult bilingual. For a similar descriptive framework with the young learner in mind, it will be necessary to describe what type of language use and communication goals are appropriate for young learners. Additionally, it would be a mistake to assume that one description or one blueprint will fit all circumstances. Choice will be available and will have to be made. For example, in Mexico a new curriculum based on a sociocultural perspective is organized in terms of social practices (Vergas and Ban, 2011) instead of communicative functions. Thus, whilst the pedagogy of EFL lessons based on CLT principles normally adopts communicative functions as an organizing principle with activities such as ordering food at a restaurant or giving directions, in a sociocultural curriculum activities are organized based on social practices that are directly relevant to children's lives and experiences such as invitations to a sister's *quicenera* party (a girl's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrated in Mexico) (Sayer and Ban, 2014), an activity that can rightly be regarded as a motivating one for young Mexican children.

One concern is that younger learners do not have immediate needs for language learning. Their immediate world is, for the overwhelming majority, a small world. Nevertheless, in today's globalized world it is undeniable that children will have more opportunities to experience contact with the outside world, meet and interact with people from other cultures. Given these realities, it would appear incumbent upon teachers to create needs, form positive attitudes towards communication, enquiry and interaction, and bring interactional and intercultural elements into the classroom.

## Communication as Process for Young Learners: Methodology

The second major trait of CLT identified is that of methodology. In CLT it is assumed that learning occurs as learners use language through communication. Thus CLT methodology is based on the communication process. This raises issues of what is involved in the communication process and whether young learners

engage in the same communication process and language use as described for adults.

### Model of Communication

According to Stelma (2010), two models of communication can be identified in recent academic publications. One is a model based on information transmission and the other a model that emphasises the co-active nature of communication. In the former, the information transmission model, communication is understood to occur when one person sends a message and another person receives that message. Accordingly, listening and reading are perceived as receptive skills, with speaking and writing as productive skills. Consequently, in CLT, various types of information transfer activities are suggested based on an information gap principle. Nunan (1989) uses the word 'producing' to describe the nature of such activities. In the second model noted by Stelma, one in which the focus is upon the co-active nature of communication, the communication process is assumed to involve all participants with communicative acts a result of participants considering and adapting to other participants in communication (Adler et al., 1998). This view is reflected in Swain's (1997) notion of collaborative dialogue and Long's (1983) negotiation of meaning. Savignon's (1991) view of CLT also reflects a co-active understanding of the process of communication. CLT is perceived to involve acts of negotiation, interpretation and expression of meaning, that is, it is an adaptive and interpretive process. Accordingly, adopting such a perspective in the classroom would require the selection of tasks and activities that involve the understanding of cultural, social, even political issues, tasks permitting the expression of feelings, beliefs and opinions, opportunities for interpretation, comparison and feedback. From a co-active perspective, tasks requiring merely productive and receptive language use are insufficient; the need is to both recognise and provide opportunities for the co-active nature of communication to assert itself.

Vygotskian theory of development emphasizes that children actively construct meaning through interaction with others. As Cameron (2001) argues, children have a strong drive to find meaning. By nature children are inclined to connect emotionally and communicate with people. It is such social and affective drive that pushes children's language development supported by social interaction and scaffolding. Therefore, the metaphor of mere input and output is insufficient to provide an understanding of the complex nature of communication and appears to be inappropriate as a model of communication for young learners. If communication means creating intersubjectivity, the sharing of understanding with

other people, then classroom activities for young learners' might more appropriately be organized based on a co-active view of the nature of communication. Children should be encouraged and enabled to express genuine thoughts and feelings using English patterns flexibly in novel situations (Paul, 2003). Accordingly, might not the notion of intersubjectivity be a useful underlying premise in the creation of classroom tasks; the provision of activities permitting the expression of thoughts and feelings, no matter how rudimentary the language used, provide useful pointers for curriculum planners and teachers alike?

### Authenticity and tasks

Further to the above noted criticisms of communication processes in CLT, examination of the very early stages of primary English poses another problem. According to Brown (1994, p.81), 'at the heart of current theories of communicative competence is the essential interactive nature of communication... thus, the communicative purpose of language compels us to create opportunities for genuine interaction in the classroom'. Accordingly, the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes is encouraged and pair work, group work, authentic input in real world contexts, and the production of language for genuine meaningful communication are identifiable features of the interactive classroom. Within the younger children's classroom, however, activities such as information gap activities and jigsaw activities are not observed, even though it is claimed that a communicative approach is adopted. What are observed instead are activities such as whole class singing of songs and choral repetition. From the viewpoint of CLT principles, these are not communication activities.

In recent pedagogy, task-based language teaching (TBLT), one form of CLT widely adopted, is considered to be motivational, providing opportunities for authentic communication. Tasks were initially introduced for adult learners with a need to use a second language outside of the classroom. Therefore, authenticity was a key element in the creation of tasks, an attempt to bring real life situations into the classroom, a desire to achieve practical goals (purposes) through the use of authentic materials. As Willis (1996) noted, tasks involve solving problems in which realness is expected in the outcome. From its initial use with adult learners, TBL has spread throughout the ESL world and can now be found in the young learners' classroom as well. An example here is the Bangalore project where the young learners' classroom might include work on maths, geography or other problems in English (Prabhu, 1987).

It is questionable, however, whether the notion of authenticity for adults is



equally applicable to young learners. Children usually do not have direct needs to use English outside the classroom. In considering tasks for young learners, Cameron (2001) argues that what is required is *dynamic congruence*, that is, “choosing appropriate activities and content that are appropriate for the children’s age and socio-cultural experience and language that will grow with the children” (p.30). Therefore, appropriate tasks for young learners might be classroom activities such as the singing of songs and taking of the register in English, both examples of authentic language use, though for some the former might not be perceived as communicative even though it is authentic.

### Importance of play

In seeking ‘real’ and suitable tasks and activities for the young learners’ classroom, play has a key role. Young children have limited reasons to use language for practical purposes and spend considerable time for play. Children enjoy language play that includes repetition, rhythm, and nonsense words. Such linguistic features are noticeable in songs, chants and nursery rhymes. Very young children are primarily driven by sound rather than meaning. They enjoy playful language even if they do not understand the meaning. Creation of patterns of sounds such as rhythm and rhyme is evident in such language play. Children’s language play is also characterized by patterns of grammatical structures such as parallelisms (Jakobson, 1960) as observed in stories and rhymes focusing on form. Moreover, children do not mind repetition. They like listening to the same story and singing the same song until they can recite or sing by heart. However, these elements of play emphasis on form, repetition, rote learning, saying without understanding do not fit with the principles of CLT (Cook 1997). Yet they are crucial for children’s daily life and development.

Study of children’s language development has revealed that formal patterns and formulaic sequences are a prerequisite of learning as it is assumed that children store and make use formal patterns and formulaic sequences to analyse grammar. While children are engaged with linguistic play, they focus on linguistic patterning supported by imaginary content and affective interaction. Thus, according to Wray, children are capable of analytical and syntactic processing alongside lexical priming and are able to cross over from one to another by substituting formulaic sequences (2000, 2002). The socio-interactional bubble in which children are immersed enables this analytical processing ability. The interaction with parents in a predictable and protected environment provides the child with time and space to analyse language. As Wray notes, “the child is afforded the luxury of developing the analytic grammar by being protected, during

these vital years, from the need to accumulate the wide range of formulaic sequences that it will ultimately need in order to function as a normal social adult” (Wray, 2002, p.137). Cook (2000) suggests that what promotes this lexico-grammatical restructuring through the safe socio-interactional bubble is play, implying the significant importance of play in children’s language development.

In Vygotskian developmental psychology, it is also suggested that play has an important role in promoting cognitive development. Play not only creates excitement but also creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD) in children, a space for stretching their learning potential. The major traits of play include imaginary situations and abstract rules (Vygotsky, 1978). Imaginative play involves a very complex mental process that contributes to cognitive development and language development. Children often engage in pretend role-play, for example, pretending to be a mother or father. This involves exercising problem solving skills as they work out the plot of their story. Additionally, as they create dialogues, it helps to develop their language ability by imitating things that they have observed in the real world. As they project themselves into the future (Lantolf, 2001), it is believed that the language children hear and imitate becomes internalized during imaginative play. Hence the child is learning to replace other regulation with self-regulation in the ZPD through play. In primary EFL Kim and Kellogg (2007) report how play contributes to learning. In their study, Korean children were observed to use more complete grammar and long sentences in role-play activities than in rule-based games and tasks. This suggests that the children engaged in role-play exhibited more developed intra-mental functions while those engaged in rule-based games and tasks exhibited more inter-mental functioning and less fully internalized language use, implying those engaged in rule-base games are at the edge of the ZPD. By revealing the children’s transformation in the ZPD, Kim and Kellogg explain why role-play precedes developmentally to rule-based games and how inter-mental relations in discourse leads to intra-mental rules of grammar.

Children in both their L1 and L2 often engage in imaginative talk, play, singing songs, repetition of verses in stories and nursery rhymes. If children’s engagement in play is reality and has a pivotal role in both cognitive development and language development, then it is required to construct a specific model of communication and CLT for young learners incorporating such elements, a model that will be different from a model for adult learners. Construction of a model needs to be based on descriptions of actual classroom interaction to reflect the reality of classroom foreign language learning (Enever and Moon, 2010). This echoes Leung’s (2005) claim to go back to the ethnographic base as Hymes’

(1972) original formulation of communicative competence. Referring to their study of children's engagements outside the classroom, Sayer and Ban (2014) also argue that it would be beneficial to take an ethnographic approach to examine what sort of engagements including play children have both in-school and outside school.

Another criticism of CLT often made is that learning by using language and communication processes is not sufficient to develop grammatical competence (Swain, 1995). To develop grammatical competence pedagogic manipulation of communicative activities may be needed such as a focus on form. However, a de-contextualised focus on grammar and vocabulary has not been shown to result in communicative development. Consequently, in creating an alternative model for young learners, there may well be a need to take note of Swain's concerns and seek to incorporate activities with a focus on form, but to do so within the wider context of communication and the world of the young learner.

### Conclusion: Communication in context

This paper has explored how CLT can be exploited for teaching English to young learners. Although English teaching is offered to children today in many parts of the world, it is still a young field with far less research carried out compared with adult English education. Identifying suitable pedagogy or pedagogies is one of the challenges confronting English education for young learners. While CLT has been adopted as an approach in the young learners' classroom, success is not assured. There are various factors including policy formation that infringe on the successful implementation of CLT at primary level. One primary issue is the need for greater understanding of the concept of CLT. It is not clear whether CLT and the model of communication underpinning CLT as currently understood are directly applicable to young learners or not.

Analysis conducted in this study suggests that, in seeking to develop better communication skills among young Japanese learners of English, conceptions of communicative competence need to be reconsidered. Taking into consideration the socially dynamic nature of communication, the goals laid down for young learners should be set with an awareness of the situational and cultural dynamics of Japanese children. Hence, there is a requirement to identify the social practices and communicative processes Japanese children engage in, processes that are undoubtedly different from those of adults. Whereas engagement in activities and tasks with functional language use is encouraged in the current CLT, insight into the nature of children's cognitive and language development suggests a need more

consciously echo the world of the child in the classroom.

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