The Advantages of Communicative Language Teaching

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Introduction

As a teacher trainer working with international groups, I am frequently asked to include an overview of communicative language teaching (CLT), and discuss ways of adapting materials to make lessons more communicative or interactive.

Most groups are enthusiastic about the lesson opportunities which CLT offers. However, some also indicated they felt constrained by the system under which they operated, especially those teaching in settings which are particularly exam-focused. In addition, they queried the relevance of CLT to their situation, where many of the students never used English outside the classroom. In contrast, I had shifted across a spectrum of learners, enthusiastically taking CLT along with me as universally appropriate.

Taking my colleagues' concerns on board, I began to question the appropriateness of CLT for some of these diverse learner groups. This was supported by current reading on the topic; the titles of some articles (see the Reference list) made me think I should give up the support for CLT then and there. However, the more I read on the topic, the more I defended the continued suitability of CLT. It really does benefit the students in a variety of ways.

Elements of CLT

Communication – According to Ability

Whether CLT should be considered an approach or a methodology is a more abstract debate and here I want to deal with its more practical aspects. In fact, it is those very elements, and the name itself, which have been used to challenge the future relevance of CLT. Firstly, the label implies a focus on communication and some might argue that this method can't be employed genuinely with low levels as there is no authentic communication, due to a limited vocabulary and restricted range of functions. Initially, many of a learner's utterances are very formulaic. As an aside, consider just what percentage of our own English expressions are unique, and how often we rely on a set phrase; just because it is delivered unselfconsciously and with natural intonation does not make it original. The aim is that the length and complexity of exchanges, and confident delivery, will grow with the student's language ability.

With the emphasis on communication, there is also the implication that spoken exchanges should be authentic and meaningful; detractors claim that the artificial nature of classroom–based (i.e. teacher - created) interactions makes CLT an oxymoron. Nevertheless, a proficient teacher will provide a context so that class interactions are realistic and meaningful but with the support needed to assist students to generate the target language. We need to consider that producing language is a skill and when we learn a skill we practise in improvised settings. For example, before a nurse gives a real injection, they have punctured many a piece of fruit to hone their technique.

Accuracy as Well as Fluency

It might also be argued that the extent of some of the structures or functions may never be used in real life. One example is adjective order; I have given students an exercise where they have to produce a phrase with a string of adjectives, such as "a strong, orange, Norwegian, canvas tent."   This is very unnatural, as most times we only combine two or three adjectives. The

other example is directions – we have students follow a map and negotiate exhaustive directions which suggest maze-like complexity. In reality, most of us probably are only involved in a three-phase set of directions. In fact, what we are doing with these exercises is exposing students to patterns which they can later activate.

This focus on accuracy versus fluency is one of the issues not often considered in a discussion of CLT. The teacher decides to pay attention to one or other end of this band, depending on the type of lesson, or the stage of a particular lesson, and accuracy is their choice if they want to deal with students getting things right, take an opportunity for correction, or gauge the success of their teaching, for example. Freer speaking involves more choice, therefore more ambiguity, and less teacher intervention. While CLT implies the lessons are more student-centred, this does not mean they are un-structured. The teacher does have a very important role in the process, and that is setting up activities so that communication actually happens. There is a lot of preparation; accuracy practice is the bridge to a fluency activity. By implication, CLT involves equipping students with vocabulary, structures and functions, as well as strategies, to enable them to interact successfully.

The reference to strategies introduces the matter of grammatical versus communicative competence. If we view the two as mutually exclusive, then we are likely to champion one over the other, in terms of approach, curriculum or whatever else determines and defines our classroom teaching. In fact, Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence, referred to by Guangwei Hu, includes four sub-categories, namely grammatical, sociolinguistic discourse and strategic. They consider someone competent in English should demonstrate both rules of grammar and use.

Promoting Learning

This returns us to the consideration of who we are teaching, and why. Are our students aiming to learn or acquire English? Do they need to know lexical items and linguistic rules as a means of passing an exam, or do they want to be able to interact in English? For those inclined to maintain the dichotomy between learning and acquisition, and who argue that our primary focus is learners, CLT still has relevance. It is timely to review an early definition of CLT. According to Richards and Rodgers, in Guangwei Hu, CLT is basically about promoting learning.

Then again, Mark Lowe suggests that we follow Halliday's lead and drop the distinction between learning and acquisition, and refer to language mastery instead. After all, if the students master the language, they will certainly be able to perform better in exams, if that is their goal. In addition, those who do see a purpose beyond classroom-related English will be better equipped for using the language socially.

Motivation

One of the constant discussions in all my teacher training groups was how to motivate students. This suggests that the focus on passing the exam was not always enough. Motivation relates to engaging students but also includes confidence building. If there is a climate of trust and support in the classroom, then students are more likely to contribute. One way of developing this is to allow pair-checking of answers before open-class checking occurs. Another way is to include an opportunity for students to discuss a topic in small groups before there is any expectation that they speak in front of the whole class. Evelyn Doman suggests that "The need for ongoing negotiation during interaction increases the learners' overt participation..." It is this involvement we need to harness and build on.

Sometimes the participation is hardly what we would define as 'negotiation', but merely a contribution. For a few students, just uttering a word or a phrase can be an achievement. Indeed, some of the teachers in the training sessions said this was the goal they set for their more reticent pupils. And I have had students who, after writing their first note or e-mail in English, expressed their pride at being able to do so.

If teachers consider an activity to be irrelevant or not engaging enough, there are many other tasks which may be more appropriate, such as surveys, using a stimulus picture and prompt questions (Who... Where... When...What...), or a series of pictures which need to be sequenced before a story is discussed. In this respect, CLT addresses another area which constantly challenges teachers, the mixed-ability class. When the lesson progresses to a freer-speaking activity, students can contribute according to their ability and confidence, although I acknowledge both need to be stretched. So there is a challenge for the more capable students, while those with an average ability still feel their effort is valid. This compares with the less

creative opportunities offered by some textbooks, where students read a dialogue, perhaps doing a substitution activity, for example.

A basic responsibility is considering and responding to the needs of our students, so if the course book is inadequate we need to employ the following steps: select, adapt, reject and supplement. Moreover, because each class we teach has its own characteristics and needs, CLT will vary each time we employ it.

Conclusion

Too often, a 'new' approach appears to completely dismiss the previous one. This is not always the intention, but probably more a result of the enthusiasm of practitioners exploring and implementing fresh activities or opportunities. Also, throughout the CLT debate, there seem to be dichotomies which are employed to argue for its irrelevance. It is evident that CLT has gathered a range of characteristics, perhaps more through misunderstanding or by association, but it is actually not as incompatible with other valued practices as it is sometimes made to appear. In practical terms, whether assisting mixed-ability classes, aiding motivation, leading from a focus on form to one of fluency, or supporting learning, it has a lot to offer the EFL teacher.

References

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