

# **CLT – Beliefs and Practices**

Melinda Tan

University of Central Lancashire, UK

## **Abstract**

Most EFL teachers only have a general idea of what communicative language teaching (CLT) is and hold many misconceptions about how to apply it in the language classroom. While CLT offers sophisticated ideas about what language is, it lacks a set of clear principles of how to teach language. This article argues that the lack of clear principles is due to the few connections that exist between CLT and models of L2 learning. It will also contend that CLT tends instead, to employ L1 learning theories which generally presume that in the right conditions, language learning will take place.

## **Introduction**

In the 1970's, there was a movement towards teaching methods which emphasised communication rather than developing intellectual abilities. In fact, communication is now seen as the fundamental reason for learning a language and for many young EFL teachers, communicative teaching has become the only teaching method that they have experienced. I will contend that most EFL teachers only have a general idea of what CLT is and hold many misconceptions about how to apply it in the classroom. These misconceptions are due to the fact that CLT is best considered an approach rather than a method as it consists mainly of a set of views about the nature of language and learning. As such, CLT does not have a procedure or an overall plan for the presentation of language material. The various views which form the basis of the CLT approach and the limitations of these views will be discussed from the perspectives of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), different educational cultures and the discourse processes involved in teaching vocabulary and pronunciation.

Before discussing the limitations of the above views from the various perspectives, it is appropriate that a brief summary of the techniques used in communicative teaching be given in order to demonstrate the heavy focus on communication in the classroom.

## Techniques of Communicative Teaching

The techniques usual involve three typical types: information gap, role-play and tasks. The goal of these communicative techniques essentially is to get students to interact with other people in the second language, in the classroom and outside.

### ***Information Gap***

An *information gap* exercise is one in which students try to use their own resources to achieve a communicative goal with other people. Here is a typical example taken from *Cutting Edge, Intermediate*, Longman:

*Work with a partner. Find 5 things you have in common. Ask about:*

- *your home/family*
- *your job/studies*
- *your likes/dislikes*

*Then tell the rest of the class about what you have discovered.*

### ***Role-play***

The second standard communicative technique is guided *role-play* where students devise conversations around a topic. Here, students try to satisfy communicative needs by using language to achieve these needs. Below is an example of a guided role-play activity taken from *Cutting Edge, Intermediate*, Longman:

Cue Card A:

#### ***You are a taxi-driver***

1. *Greet the passenger and ask him where he wants to go.*
2. *Say the price. Make some comments on the weather. Ask the passenger if he likes this weather.*
3. *Answer the passenger's question. Boast that your son has won the school swimming competition. Ask if the passenger likes swimming.*

Cue Card B:

***You are a passenger in a taxi***

1. *Greet the taxi driver and say where you want to go. Ask what the price will be.*
2. *Answer the taxi-driver's question and ask what kind of weather he likes.*
3. *Say that you like swimming a lot and that you learned to swim 10 years ago when you went to Spain with your family.*

***Tasks***

The third general technique is tasks: students carry out *tasks* in the classroom with a definite outcome. Students work together individually, in pairs or in groups to complete the task and share their results with their peers (see Appendix 1, a sample task-based activity which has been taken from <http://www.insideout.net/happybirthday.pdf>)

## **Learning in Communicative Language Teaching**

Although the goal of CLT is communication, there is surprisingly little association between CLT and SLA research. There are however some assertions that task-based learning is based on psychological and educational research. In fact, the foundations of CLT are rooted in functional theories of L1 acquisition, rather than the models of L2 learning. It neglects to consider the learning process, and claims, using according to Krashen's input model, that by providing students with the appropriate conditions, learning will take place. The lack of consideration of the L2 learning process hence gives rise to the following misconceptions of how CLT should be administered in the classroom.

***Misconception 1: Learning will take place naturally***

Historically, the communicative style relates to the idea of developing language systems – interlanguage. Teachers are expected to respect the developing language systems of the students rather than see them as defective. In fact, the major impact of SLA research on language teaching is the independent language assumption which liberates the teacher from contrived grammatical progressions and allows them to desist from correcting all the student's mistakes: learners need the freedom to construct language for themselves, even if this means making 'mistakes'.

My reservation about the independent language assumption is that it creates a mistaken belief among teachers that learning takes place in the students' minds in ways that teachers have no control over. The students are expected to work on their own learning without any interference from the teacher. If this belief is allowed to be translated into classroom practice, it can lead to the misconception that any activity is valid as long as it gives students practice in testing out their hypotheses about a particular language item through talking. As Cook (2001: 89) cautions, "however enjoyable the class may be, however much language is provoked from the students, the teacher always has to question whether the time is being well spent; are the students learning as much from the activity as they would from something else?". The extract below, taken from a Thai EFL class at Assumption University in Bangkok, illustrates the kind of talk that goes on in CLT classes and questions whether students in the class have really learnt anything from the activity:

**Student:** I just have three years for interesting about Japanese.

**Teacher:** What do you mean you just have three years interested in Japanese.

**Student:** Before my college I just know little about Japanese, just little about some movie star. I just know a little. Then my friend he call me at that time in summer holiday. He telephone me do you like the Japanese? I said so so.

**Teacher:** What did he mean do you like Japanese? Do you like Japanese girls, do you like Japanese people? What did he mean?

**Student:** general things about Japanese. My student take major in Business Japanese. For me another college. He in Shang-Hai University and in summer holiday. He telephone me if you meet some Japanese person you can come to our university. A group of Japanese will come here and party. So I say no problem. I go thee. Then at that time just my student I know. The other I don't know. At that time in party, I just know one person in Shang-Hai university.

In short, the communicative style maintains that L2 learning happens unconsciously provided the student interacts with other people. Many of its techniques emphasise active practice, spoken language coupled with spontaneous production and comprehension. However, as there is no pre-learning phase in which students are given examples of dialogues to practise through drills and in a controlled fashion, this leads to the kind of mistakes found in the Thai students' writing samples. Here is an original extract of a student's writing based on a topic about learning English.

### **The Experience of My Learning English Language**

*When I was young, I never interesting about English language. I think I won't go outside my country so I don't want to study hard in English Language.*

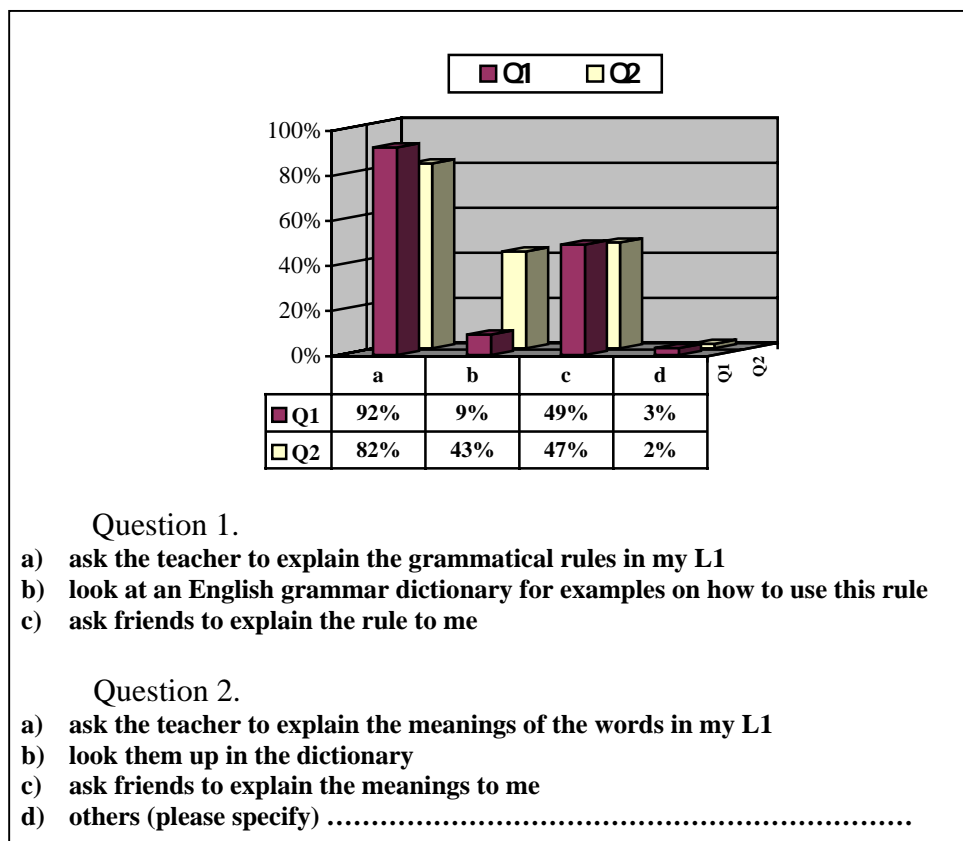
*When I was young, my Kindergarten school is Private school so I start to study English language since Kindergarten school but when I studying in Primary school it's public school, they didn't teach me so I don't think anything about it until I', studying grade 4 they start to teach me. But I'm not interest it. I change the school to secondary school and high school when I'm 12 years old, it's still to be public school but I have English class 5 period per week or my English's teacher is Thai people so I always study English language with Thai teacher and I never interesting about English. Anyway, I like to sing a English song and I did it well. I always to sing English song with my friend.*

The teaching technique used in CLT classrooms has now changed the teacher's role to that of facilitator rather than controller. The teacher's role is simply to design tasks or information gap activities and let the students learn through interaction, offering help but not control. One element in this technique comes from beliefs about Universal Grammar. The main belief here is that if the students are using in-built processes of learning, the teacher simply lets the students get on with their own learning by providing activities and language examples. The natural processes culminate into hypothesis testing where learners try to guess the rules of the language, practise their hypotheses by producing sentences, and accept or revise their rules based on the feedback they are given.

The danger of using the above teaching technique in an EFL classroom however, is that it fails to consider the fact that this process of hypothesis testing requires more correction than L1 children get. The need for more correction is especially important in an L2/FL classroom due to the following reasons: 1) students do not get as much exposure to the target language as L1 children do outside of the classroom and 2) CLT has no techniques of its own for teaching pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary compared to the traditional grammar translation or audio-lingual method. The data below is taken from a short questionnaire completed by Thai EFL students at Assumption University in Bangkok. The data illustrates that the lack of appropriate techniques for learning grammar and vocabulary in the students' CLT classes could possibly have been responsible for their choice of the following learning strategies:

*Question 1. When I don't understand how a grammar rule works, I usually ...*

*Question 2. When I don't understand the meanings of vocabulary words, I usually ...*



*Misconception 2: The mother tongue has no place in the classroom*

In CLT classrooms, there is little systematic recognition of the possibilities available to the learner through the mother tongue. It is undeniable and only natural that pair work and group work among students with the same first language often lead to frequent code-switching between the first and the second/foreign language – something which is now seen as part of natural language acquisition rather than seen as undesirable. In fact, the phrase "the use of the mother tongue" should not be misinterpreted as the excessive use of the mother tongue. Hawks (2001:100) explains that it "should be selective and not seen as an easy option." The idea of the use of the mother tongue is a limited or controlled use. Furthermore, according to Atkinson (1987), the mother tongue can be usefully applied in the classroom as a bridge to learn the target language. The mother tongue can be used for comprehension purposes, reinforcing linguistics items that students have just learned in class, recognizing and raising awareness of their own language and the target language, finding ways of expressing words in the target language, producing contextual utterances, and testing their L1 and L2 linguistics

knowledge. Atkinson (1987: 234-235) listed some techniques along with his explanations in using the mother tongue in the classroom as follows:

- to elicit language (for all levels), e.g. "How do you say '*kata benda*' (nouns) in English?"
- to check comprehension (all levels), 1) of a structure e.g. How do you say "she has been a teacher for ten years" in Indonesian?" - this could enable the learners to differentiate 'structural, semantic and pragmatic' equivalence. 2) listening and reading text. If we accept that decoding and recoding are independent processes to some extent, a comprehension task that concerns with production (but presented in the learners' mother tongue) can help comprehension more effectively.
- Giving instructions (early levels): give instructions using the target language and ask the learners to repeat it in their own mother tongue to make sure that they understand what to do.
- Co-operation among learners: students compare their answers to grammatical exercises or other activities using their mother tongue (early levels). It also depends on the teaching objectives. If the objective is to guide the students to understand a specific structure, then this activity would not be a hindrance. Sometimes the teacher's explanation, no matter how well-organized and clear it is, may not be understood by some students while explanation using the mother tongue by a peer who has understood may be very helpful for them.
- Discussions of classroom methodology (early levels). It is advisable that the teacher should be aware of their students' reaction to what happens in the classroom and that the students have the right to say what they think about it. Therefore, discussions of methodology at early levels is better to be conducted either in a combination of both languages or in the students' mother tongue.
- Presentation and reinforcement of language (mainly early years). An exercise that focuses on a recently taught language item and which involves translation of a paragraph or set of sentences into the target language can be a useful reinforcement of structural, conceptual, and sociolinguistics differences between the students' mother tongue and the target language.
- Checking for sense. Students sometimes make a nonsensical translation into the target language, especially in writing composition or doing gap-filling/cloze exercise. They

tend to focus too much on the form rather than meaning and context. Therefore, it is useful to use a checking technique by doing a quick mental translation of a composition or gap-fill/cloze exercise to show that they have produced a nonsensical discourse in both languages.

- Testing. Translation can help to maximize the validity and reliability of many types of tests. This is in accordance to what Cunningham (1929) points out that translation is 'the supreme test of knowledge of two languages.
- Development of useful learning strategies. Atkinson suggests that thinking in English should be a long-term goal and in the mean time students need to be encouraged to develop communication strategies. Teachers need to make the students aware of what they can do with the limited L2 knowledge they have. Developing this ability is important to successful language learning. It becomes a stepping-stone for the students to begin to think in the target language of "how can I express "X" in English?" In this case, he refers to activities that promote the skills of circumlocution, paraphrase, explanation, and simplification. He gives an example as follow: Students' question of "how do you say 'X' in English?" is not answered immediately but thrown back to them after the activity, and they are asked (in pairs or groups) to find a way to express the meaning by using what they know in the target language.

### *Misconception 3: CLT is appropriate for all educational cultures*

The communicative style is restricted to certain types of student. It might better benefit field-independent learners who tend to be more extroverted rather than field-dependent learners who are introverted. Furthermore, its style can go against students' expectations of the classroom more than other styles. According to Cook (2001), students in Asian countries for example, might not be comfortable with the teacher's lack of authoritarian controlling in a communicative classroom. Furthermore, Hofstede's (1980) work on intercultural communication when applied to the foreign language classroom seems to suggest that the communicative style fits more with cultures that are 'individualistic' rather than cultures which are more 'collectivist', say in Japan or Thailand. The data below illustrates that in EFL classes in Thailand, for example, students feel that they want more teacher-directed involvement in their language learning processes, especially with regard to error correction. The data below once again has been taken from a short questionnaire conducted with 69 Thai EFL students at Assumption University in Bangkok.



<b>Written Errors</b>	<b>Very High Preference</b>	<b>High Preference</b>	<b>Low Preference</b>	<b>Least Preference</b>
The teacher supplies the correct form	37.7%	52.2%	8.7%	1.4%
The teacher writes comments that enables you to correct the errors yourself	33.3%	53.6%	7.2%	5.8%
<b>Spoken Errors</b>				
The teacher gives you the right form and you repeat it.	49.3%	37.3%	13%	0%
The teacher gives the right form and explains the errors	52.2%	40.6%	5.8%	1.4%
The teacher does not correct any errors.	0	13.0%	20.3%	66.7%
<b>General Comments</b>				
Errors should be corrected	59.4%	34.8%	4.3%	1.4%
I would like all errors to be corrected	44.9%	43.5%	10.1%	1.4%

## Conclusion

In summary, the main argument in this paper contends that in general, communicative language teaching has sophisticated ideas of what language is and of what students need to learn. The techniques used in the classroom have certainly freed the classroom from the rigid styles of the academic and audio-lingual methods. However, it is hard to isolate a set of clear principles in the same way for communicative teaching as for these two styles. However appealing the communicative techniques of information gap, role play and task-based learning, there are only a few of them. It is only natural that teachers sometimes feel that they have not been given enough guidance in how to use CLT in the classroom but only a few techniques and suggestions. What should be borne in mind of these teachers perhaps is that

communicative teaching must be used with appropriate students in appropriate circumstances. Also, as most EFL students learn English for examination purposes, teachers using the CLT approach could supplement it with the explicit teaching of other components of the language – pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Finally, as a rule of thumb, perhaps teachers should simply follow their own instincts and apply teaching methods which are sensitive to the different educational and cultural backgrounds of their students

## About the Author

The author is based in the Department of Languages and International Studies, University of Central Lancashire, UK.

Email: mtan@ukonline.co.uk

## References

- Atkinson, D. (1987). 'The Mother Tongue in the Classroom: A Neglected Resource?', *ELT Journal*, 41/4: 241-7.
- Cook V. (2001). *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.)*. New York: Arnold.
- Hawks, P. (2001). 'Making Distinctions: A Discussion of the Use of the Mother Tongue in the Foreign Language Classroom', *Hwa Kang Journal of TEFL*, 7:47-55.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage

## Appendix 1

# Inside Out

## A Catchy Little Tune

WORKSHEET A

1. Read the story and then answer the questions on Worksheet B



This simple four-line ditty was written as a classroom greeting in 1893 by two sisters. Mildred Hill, a teacher at the Louisville, Kentucky Experimental Kindergarten, and Dr. Patty Hill, the principal of the same school, together wrote the song for their 5 year-old pupils.

The melody of the song was composed by Mildred, who was born in Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A, on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1859. The song was first published in 1893, with the lyrics written by her sister, Patty, as *Good Morning To All*.

Mildred was an expert on spiritual songs and played the organ in her local church, while Patty, who later became a professor at Columbia University, specialized in Kindergarten Education. Although the song was published in 1893, it wasn't copyrighted until 1935. The copyright was taken out under a different name and it wasn't renewed until 1963.

The song was popularised in the late 1930's when it was sung in the Broadway production of *As Thousands Cheer*, and has since become the mega-classic hit of all time.

In 1988, Birch Tree Group Ltd, the original publishers, sold the rights of the song, and all their other assets, to Warner Communications for an estimated \$25 million.

During the 1980s, the song was believed to generate about \$1 million in royalties annually. Along with *Auld Lang Syne* (sung at midnight on New Year's Eve) and *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow* (sung to celebrate someone's achievement), it is among the three most popular songs in the English language.

It continues to bring in around \$2 million in licensing revenue each year, according to current publisher Warner Chappell.

### Glossary

**ditty** noun [C] *often humorous* a short simple song or poem.

**copyright** noun [C/U] the legal right to have control over the work of a writer, artist, musician etc. If you own the copyright on something, it is your **intellectual property**, and other people must pay you to broadcast, publish or perform it: *The court case was brought to decide who owns the copyright.*

**asset** noun [usually plural] [C] something such as money or property that a person or company owns: *The business has assets totalling £5.1 million.*

**revenue** noun [C/U] income from business activities or taxes: *The magazine had been losing advertising revenues for months.*

**royalty** noun [usually plural] [C] a payment that someone such as a writer or musician gets each time their work is sold or performed.

*Glossary reference: The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2002*

2. Answer the questions.

Write your answers in the puzzle below to reveal the name of the song.

1. In which city was Mildred born?
2. The song was originally titled *Good \_\_\_\_\_ To All*.
3. What's the word for a short, simple song or poem?
4. Which musical instrument did Mildred play?
5. Which U.S state were the sisters from?
6. Which sister wrote the words of the song?
7. What do Americans call a school for 5 to 6 year-olds?
8. Which sister wrote the music for the song?
9. The Broadway musical which made the song famous was called *As \_\_\_\_\_ Cheer*.
10. Money or property that a person or company owns.
11. You get paid this if someone uses your work.
12. What was Patty's position at her school?
13. What was the name of the university where she later worked?
14. On New Year's Eve, people sing *Auld Lang \_\_\_\_\_*.
15. If something is your intellectual property, it means you own the \_\_\_\_\_.
16. What kind of songs was Mildred an expert on?
17. The publishers who now own the song are called \_\_\_\_\_ Chappell.
18. The publishers who first owned the rights were called \_\_\_\_\_ Tree Group.

