

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Introduction

CLT is a recognized theoretical model in English language teaching today. Many applied linguists regard it as one of the most effective approaches to ELT. Since its inception in Europe in early 1970s, CLT has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practice round the world. CLT has extended in scope and has been used by different educators in different ways.

It is most likely that when asked to name the methodology they make use of in their classrooms, the majority of language teachers today assert “communicative” as the methodology of choice. However, when pushed to give a detailed account of what they mean by “communicative,” their explanations diverge broadly. What is involved in CLT? Does CLT mean teaching conversation, an absence of grammar in a course, or an emphasis on open-ended discussion activities as the main features of a course? The answers to these questions can be best understood by examining CLT in terms of its historical development, of a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the language classroom.

Where did CLT originate and why is it so popular?

CLT was developed in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s and popularized by the British Council and the Council of Europe. CLT was a reaction to language teaching methods that seemed ineffective (e.g., grammar/translation [GT], audio-lingual method [ALM]) in developing learners “who can communicate both orally and in writing with native speakers in a way appropriate to their mutual needs”. English has become the international language of commerce, science, and technology. As a result, many people around the world are now experiencing “English fever,” which is a great desire to learn English, especially how to engage in conversation in English.

Definition and Principles of CLT

CLT starts with a theory of language as communication, and its goal is to develop learners’ communicative competence. Despite being a simplistic account of CLT, this idea of communicative competence is considered to be the main conception of CLT. Communicative competence included knowing what to say and how to say it appropriately based on the situation, the participants, and their roles and intentions (See Figure 1). Traditional grammatical and vocabulary syllabuses and teaching methods did not include information of this kind. It was assumed that this kind of knowledge would be picked up informally.

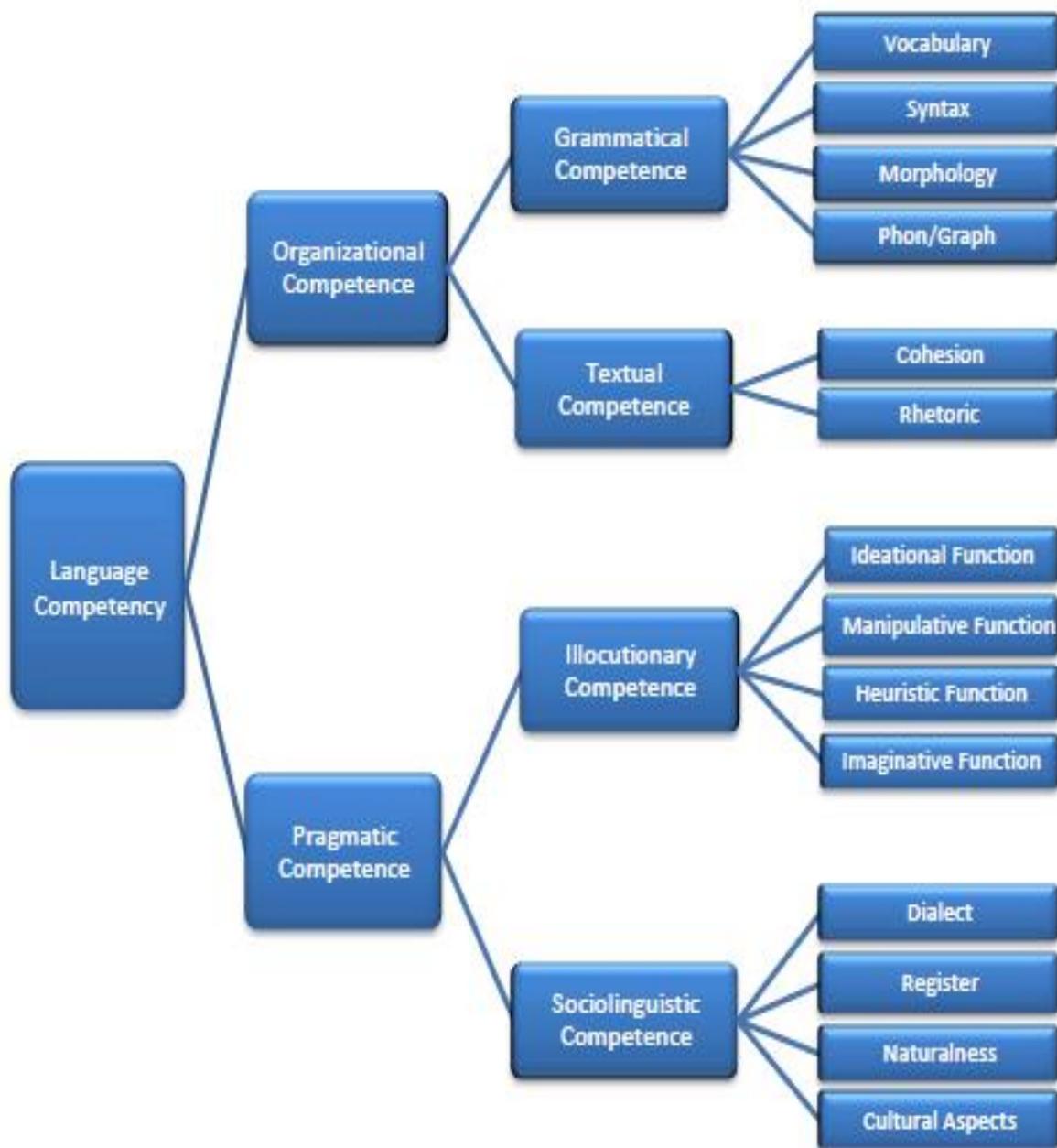


Figure 1. Components of Language Competence (Bachman, 1990, p.87)

In fact, CLT is not a monolithic and uniform approach to language teaching. CLT consists of a ‘weak’ and a ‘strong’ version. The weak version of CLT is based on the assumption that the components of communicative competence can be identified, and thus systematically taught. From this perspective, CLT can be thought to be an interventionist and analytic approach to language teaching, which means that CLT does not display a fundamental difference from the earlier traditional approaches. This weak version of CLT highlights the significance of providing

learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching. Such a version of CLT proposes that instead of teaching the structural properties of language, teachers pay attention to particular notions such as ‘possibility’, ‘possession’, as well as language functions such as ‘making requests’ and ‘giving advice.’ The weak version of CLT is described as “learning to use English”.

On the contrary, a strong version of CLT is based on the claim that “language is acquired through communication”. In other words, learners do not go through a learning experience in which they acquire the structural properties of a language and then learn to use this structural system in communication. As a matter of fact, they discover the system itself as they learn how to communicate in a language. This version proposes that teachers provide learners with ample opportunities to familiarize themselves with how language is used in actual communication. The strong version of CLT entails “using English to learn it”.

The key principles of CLT are listed below:

- Make real communication the focus of language learning.
- Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.
- Be tolerant of learners’ errors as they indicate that the learners are building up their communicative competence.
- Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.
- Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world.
- Let students induce or discover grammar rules.

Classroom Activities in CLT

Communicative intent is always given a prime position in every CLT activity. In a communicative class, students are provided with opportunities to use the language a great deal through communicative activities. There are various classifications of activities that are typically found in a communicative language classroom. A distinction can be made between fluency and accuracy activities. It is mostly agreed that one of the goals of CLT is to develop fluency in language use. Thus, activities focusing on fluency have the following characteristics:

- They reflect natural use of language,
- They focus on achieving communication,
- They require meaningful use of language,
- They require the use of communication strategies,
- They produce language that may not be predictable,
- They seek to link language use to context.

Teachers and Students' Roles in CLT Classroom

The learner-centered characteristic of CLT and the new type of classroom activities imply different roles in the language classroom for teachers and learners than from those found in more traditional second language classrooms. Learners in CLT classrooms are supposed to participate in classroom activities that are based on a collaborative rather than individualistic approach to learning. They are portrayed as active participants in the language learning process. Therefore, CLT alters the role of the teacher. Also, CLT as a methodology has much to do with interaction. It uses communication as a means to reach the goal, which is also communication. Accordingly, it would be wise to claim that teacher's and students' roles in CLT classroom have a dynamic feature, and thus they tend to vary all the time.

Teachers' Roles

The first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. A third role of the teacher is that of a researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities.

This draws attention to a distinctive feature of CLT – that of a “learner-centered and experience-based view of second language teaching”. It is thus advisable for teachers adopting a communicative approach to produce and use authentic teaching materials that meet the needs of their particular learners. Moreover, teachers need to motivate their students, as well as provide them with a comfortable classroom atmosphere for language learning. CLT discourages pervasive teacher-controlled drills, quizzing of memorized material, and extensive explanation on forms of English.

In addition, it is typical in a CLT classroom that it is not merely the teacher, but everyone present who manages the classroom performance. It is maintained that teachers can no longer be regarded simply as teachers and learners just as learners, since they both are managers of learning. The traditional image of the teacher as the dominating authority figure in the classroom is dissolved into such a role that necessitates facilitating the communicative process in the classroom where students feel safe, unthreatened and non-defensive.

Students' Roles

The roles of students in CLT classroom are supposed to be “those of negotiators for meaning, communicators, discoverers, and contributors of knowledge and information”.

What are some common misconceptions regarding CLT?

1. CLT does not teach grammar.

It was Stephen Krashen, not CLT advocates, who spoke against explicit grammar teaching. Dr. Krashen's second language acquisition (SLA) theory, the Monitor Model, inspired the development of the Natural Approach and Focal Skills in ELT. CLT advocates urge that grammar be taught inductively (guiding students to discover the rules themselves, as in linguistics data problems) rather than deductively (the teaching of rules). However, because adult learners possess analytical skills, they sometimes demand and often benefit from explicit grammar teaching. Grammatical analysis and drills do not dominate CLT classrooms because CLT teachers realize that learners learn more by using the language than by learning about the language.

2. CLT teaches only speaking.

CLT is based on the linguistic theory of communicative competence, which includes more than just negotiating meaning through oral interaction alone. Communicative competence includes the following components: grammatical competence, psychomotor (pronunciation) competence, lexical (vocabulary) competence, discourse (overall organization of an oral or written utterance, coherence or unity of topic, and cohesion or sentence-to-sentence fluency) competence, strategic (overall fluency and linguistic spontaneity) competence, sociolinguistic (cross-cultural awareness) competence, and pragmatic (culturally appropriate rhetoric and paralinguistic behaviors) competence.

3. CLT uses only pair work and/or group work in the classroom.

CLT teachers tend to use a lot of pair work and group work in the classroom in order to highlight the interactional nature of real language. However, individual work is also a part of a CLT classroom.

4. CLT uses only English in the classroom.

The CLT teacher does not hesitate to use the learners' native language to expedite learning. Usually such native language use is limited to clarifying a vocabulary item or a complex grammatical structure.

5. CLT encourages fossilization in learners.

CLT teachers tolerate errors, but they are aware that developing communicative competence includes learners' developing interlanguages, or learners' own understanding of how the language works, which is often flawed until learners develop a higher proficiency level of their interlanguages. CLT teachers look for patterns of errors in a learner, rather than all the mistakes, and the CLT teachers correct the patterns. CLT teachers do not focus on accuracy at the expense of fluency or communicativeness. CLT teachers aim first for fluency, then for accuracy.

Types of Corrective Feedback

-  1. **Explicit correction.** Clearly indicating that the student's utterance was incorrect, the teacher provides the correct form.
-  2. **Metalinguistic clues.** Without providing the correct form, the teacher poses questions or provides comments or information related to the formation of the student's utterance.
-  3. **Elicitation.** The teacher directly elicits the correct form from the student by asking questions by pausing to allow the student to complete the teacher's utterance, or by asking students to reformulate the utterance. Elicitation questions differ from questions that are defined as metalinguistic clues in that they require more than a yes/no response.
-  4. **Repetition.** The teacher repeats the student's error and adjusts intonation to draw student's attention to it.
-  5. **Recast.** Without directly indicating that the student's utterance was incorrect, the teacher implicitly reformulates the student's error, or provides the correction.
-  6. **Clarification request.** By using phrases like "Excuse me?" or "I don't understand," the teacher indicates that the message has not been understood or that the student's utterance contained some kind of mistake and that a repetition or a reformulation is required.

What are some barriers to CLT?

1. High English language proficiency required of teachers
2. Test preparation required of teachers/ use of national, regional, and/or local non-communicative tests
3. Large class sizes (e.g., 50-60 students in a single class) for one teacher to handle
4. Fixed furniture, physically small classroom
5. Lack of teacher training in effective CLT strategies
6. Lack of practice among teachers in using effective CLT strategies
7. Expected classroom behavior among teachers and students in certain cultures
8. Much time on the part of the teacher needed for preparing effective CLT activities
9. Much time required in the classroom for implementing effective CLT activities

How can teachers surmount these barriers?

1. If necessary, improve oral/aural proficiency.
2. Try to develop an "eclectic" English teaching approach, which incorporates some traditional English teaching strategies along with CLT strategies.
3. The following guidelines have been developed to support teachers developing a CLT approach:
 - 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.

What is CLT heading for?

1. More Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)
2. Balance of implicit and explicit teaching
3. Focus on “principled” language teaching: Linguistic, Cognitive, Affective
4. Continuing focus on professional development for teachers, which includes reflection and “critical” questioning of approaches and strategies
5. Despite changes in the status of approaches and methods, we can therefore expect the field of second and foreign language teaching, in the twenty-first century to be no less a ferment of theories, ideas, and practices than it has been in the past.