Communicative language teaching in theory and practice

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Introduction

All courses based on functional/notional models must take as their starting point that communication must be taught and is therefore the primary objective, not merely the by-product of other objectives.


From the work of David Wilkins we took as our starting point this quotation: What people want to do through language is more important than the mastery of language as an unapplied system.

(Abbs et al., 1975: 4)

The above two quotes highlight a significant paradigm shift in language teaching methodology that took place in the early 1970s and whose effects were still reverberating at the end of the decade – and beyond. The significance of the first owes as much to the fact that its author was Louis Alexander, perhaps the most widely published ELT materials writer of the time, and who, only a few years previously, had written (in the introductory notes to his hugely successful New Concept English series): “The basic aim in any language is to train the student to use new patterns” (Alexander, 1967: xiii).

The significance of the second is that it prefaces one of the first textbooks to break ranks with the prevailing structural organisation, adopting instead a syllabus organised round communicative functions and semantic notions, and, in so doing, helped popularise what would become known as communicative language teaching (CLT). Both quotes, in turn, reflect a seismic shift in the field of linguistics: “a reaction against the view of language as a set of structures; [and] a reaction towards a view of language as communication” (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979: 3). However, as Howatt (2004: 339) observes, what was attractive about this new approach “was not so much the novel syllabuses as the refreshing sense of freedom that followed the end of the over-rigid structural syllabus and the welcome variety of classroom activities that accompanied the new approach”. But what precipitated such a radical turn of events?
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A theory of language

The immediate impetus to define curriculum objectives not as structural ‘patterns’ but in terms of ‘functional/notional models’ emerged out of a Council of Europe project in the early 1970s that aimed to reform and standardise the teaching of modern languages to adults across Europe, and, specifically, to devise “a framework for adult language learning, based upon the language needs of the learner and the linguistic operations required of him [sic] in order to function effectively as a member of the language community for the purposes, and in the situations, revealed by those needs” (Trim, 1973, quoted in Brumfit and Johnson, 1979: 102). In order to specify the components of such a needs-and-purposes-driven curriculum, the advice of various linguists was sought, including David Wilkins. To Wilkins and his colleagues, it was self-evident that a curriculum designed to enable the learner “to function effectively” should be “organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet these purposes” (Wilkins, 1976: 13). It quickly became an article of faith that a purely formal organisation, as in a structural syllabus, inadequately reflects and poorly predicts the way language is used in order to communicate. If language teaching was to be concerned with effective communication, this would mean “beginning with the context and purpose of utterances and asking how these might be expressed, rather than taking a linguistic form and asking what might be communicated through it” (Wilkins, 1972: 148).

This alternative organisation, as elaborated for the Council of Europe both by Van Ek (1975/1980) and Wilkins (1976), prioritised semantic categories, specifically language notions and communicative functions, over structural ones (hence, such syllabi – and the teaching approach that entailed their use – were initially labelled functional-notional). The emphasis on what the learner will be able to do, i.e. concrete behaviours as opposed to abstract linguistic knowledge, is consistent with Wilkins’ injunction (1976: 42; cited by Abbs et al., above) that “What people want to do through language is more important than the mastery of language as an unapplied system”.

Of course, a concern for what people want to do through language was not new. Wilkins and his contemporaries were themselves the heirs to a long tradition in British linguistics whose emphasis on context, meaning and ‘language as part of the social process’ was in sharp distinction to the Bloomfieldian structuralism that reigned on the other side of the Atlantic. Probably the most influential figure in this tradition was Michael Halliday (e.g. Halliday, 1978), whose foregrounding of the social and functional aspects of language and the way that these aspects are instantiated as text (or ‘social exchange of meanings’) undergirds the whole communicative enterprise.

“What people want to do through language” also recalls the work of the philosophers J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle, and especially the former’s How to Do Things with Words (Austin, 1962). Speech act theory argues that “speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on” (Searle, 1969: 16). The analysis of real-life interactions (i.e. discourse analysis) in terms of speech acts was developed in Birmingham in the early 1970s (e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). The same tools were enlisted to meet the growing need for instructional materials that targeted specific registers: discourse analysis underpinned the design of the first ESP (English for specific purposes) courses (see Starfield, this volume). Before long, general English courses were incorporating an explicit reference to discourse in their objectives. The Teacher’s Book for Building Strategies (Abbs and Freebairn, 1979: iv), for example, identifies as one of its aims: “[to] build up the language skills needed for extended discourse e.g. for reporting, narrating, describing, explaining”, and “[to] practise connected speaking and writing”.

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So far, the impression might have been given that CLT was a purely European or even British-inspired phenomenon. However, US-based scholars, particularly those working in the field of sociolinguistics, also contributed in a major way to its development. Not the least of these was Dell Hymes, and, in fact, it is to Hymes that Howatt (2004) attributes the single ‘big idea’ that underpins CLT and from which the approach derived its name: *communicative competence*. In contradistinction to Chomsky’s limited conception of competence as being a purely linguistic construct, Hymes argued that “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless” (1972: 278) and that a socially-sensitive notion of competence entails knowing “when to speak, when not, [. . .] what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (1972: 277). This notion of *communicative competence* – subsequently reconfigured to include sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences (Canale and Swain, 1980) – significantly extended the goals of teaching. The idea, for example, that strategic competence could be developed through pedagogic tasks was adopted by Savignon (1972) in a ground-breaking classroom-based study, and one which first introduced the term communicative competence into the discourse of teaching, thereby marking a bridgehead into the new paradigm.

**A theory of learning**

An elaborated *theory of language* was now in place, but what was singularly lacking was a *theory of learning* to complement it and a methodology to actualise it. To bridge the gap, procedures inherited from audiolingualism were retained and adapted. Hence, Rivers (1981) proposed *skill-getting* (including the use of pattern-practice drills) as a prerequisite for *skill-using*, while Littlewood’s (1981: 85) framework distinguished between pre-*communicative* and *communicative* activities, the former being the stage when “specific elements of knowledge or skill which compose communicative ability” are practised in isolation before eventual integration into communicative tasks.

Subsequently, cognitivist accounts of language acquisition (e.g. McLaughlin, 1987; Johnson, 1996; Skehan, 1998), which in turn drew on information-processing models in cognitive psychology (principally Anderson, 1983), lent credence to the skill-getting/skill-using framework, where practice in ‘real operating conditions’ helps automatise declarative knowledge (Johnson, 1996). At the same time, interlanguage studies (e.g. Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1981) that posited a ‘natural order’ of acquisition and the inevitability of error seemed to lend force to the argument that an overemphasis on accuracy at the expense of (communicative) fluency was misguided and that, as Littlewood (1981: 32) puts it, errors should be recognised “as a natural and acceptable phenomenon in any situation where learners have an urgent need to communicate”.

More radically, and perhaps partly influenced by innatist theories of first language acquisition, some scholars put the case for purely experiential models of learning, or “learning by doing”. Allwright (1979: 170), for example, argued persuasively for a “minimal teaching strategy” whereby learners simply performed communicative tasks in the belief that “language learning will take care of itself”. The ‘minimal teaching strategy’ received endorsement through the popularisation of Krashen’s distinction between *acquisition* and *learning* (Krashen, 1981) and his argument that language acquisition occurs only when unconscious processes are activated by exposure to comprehensible input. Krashen’s rejection of a role for ‘formal instruction’ offered support for the kind of experiential ‘deep-end’ approach advocated by Allwright.

Building on Krashen’s ‘input hypothesis’, Long’s ‘interaction hypothesis’ (e.g. 1983) claimed that input can be rendered comprehensible, and thus available for acquisition, through such interactional processes as conversational repair and ‘negotiation for meaning’, that is to say, the kind of modifications that had been observed when learners are performing an *information-gap task*. Continuing this line of thinking, Swain’s ‘output hypothesis’ (Swain, 1985) suggested that
when learners experience communicative failure, they are ‘pushed’ both into making their output more comprehensible and into reappraising their existing interlanguage system, which provides further justification for the classroom use of communicative tasks.

Thus, more than a decade after its inception, the communicative approach was beginning to gather the ingredients of a learning theory to complement its theory of language. Even so, the tension between the linguistic and psychological underpinnings persisted, suggesting to Stern (1981) that there were two distinct approaches to CLT: the L (or linguistic) approach, as embodied in functional-notional syllabuses, and the P (or psychological and pedagogic approach), in which naturalistic learning processes are activated through communication. Stern argued that the two approaches could, and should, be synthesised, with an experiential element complementing the more academic elements. Howatt (1984: 279) made a similar distinction: between the ‘weak’ version of CLT, involving the systematic and incremental teaching of the sub-components of communicative competence, and the ‘strong’ version, which ‘advances the claim that language is acquired through communication’. (The ‘strong’ version evolved into what is now known as task-based instruction; see Van den Branden, this volume.)

Nevertheless, and in spite of these tensions, by the mid-1980s there was a palpable sense the CLT had come of age and ‘assumed the status of orthodoxy’ (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 83), at least in British teaching circles. In the United States, its adoption was a little slower, but by 1994, H.D. Brown was confident enough to answer the question ‘Is there a currently recognised approach that is a generally accepted norm in the field?’ by saying, ‘the answer is a qualified yes. That qualified yes can be captured in the term communicative language teaching (CLT)’ (Brown, 1994: 77; emphasis in original).

So far, the impression may have been given that the advent of CLT was an unanticipated watershed event and that it happened independently of other concurrent social, political, economic and philosophical developments. But, as Hunter and Smith (2012; see also, Hall, this volume, ch. 15) make clear, few if any developments in language teaching methodology represent a complete break with the past. For many educationalists, CLT was simply ‘new wine in old bottles’.” CLT is not a new idea,” Savignon (2001: 18) reminds us. “Throughout the long history of language teaching, there always have been advocates of a focus on meaning, as opposed to form, and of developing learner ability to use the language for communication.” Even scholars working within an audiolingual framework had, for some time, been advocating communicative tasks as a complement to more mechanical activities. Rivers (1972: 74), for example, reported “an increasing interest in communication and on what are being called communication drills,” while, even earlier, Prator (1969) proposed that the teacher’s repertory should include not only manipulative drills but also a gamut of ‘communicative activities’, sequenced in terms of the teacher’s decreasing control. As Hunter and Smith (2012: 437) discovered: “Some of the ideas now associated with CLT were rooted in earlier discourse.”

Moreover, as Howatt (2004) suggests, the notion of ‘communication’ was very much a feature of the educational and ideological climate at the end of the 1960s – a climate that was both progressive in spirit and pragmatic in terms of its educational goals. Savignon (1991: 264) notes how the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, with its emphasis on individual empowerment, impelled methodologists working in Germany in the 1970s (such as Christopher Candlin, Christoph Edelhoff and Hans-Eberhard Piepho) in the direction of greater learner autonomy and ‘communicatively oriented English teaching’. Likewise, Crookes (2009) associates the emergence of CLT in Europe with post-war ‘reconstructionism’, i.e. the impulse towards social and political integration and international mobility. Courses in ‘communication sciences’ and ‘communication studies’ burgeoned in university social science departments from the 1950s on, while leading educationalists (e.g. Barnes, 1976) were invoking the notion of communication as being at the
heart of the learning process. Indeed, the idea that learning is experiential and that communication is the means by which experiences are shared and made meaningful dates at least as far back as the educational philosophy of John Dewey in the early twentieth century. As Crookes (2009: 70) notes, “the activity-centred curriculum of the British primary school [in the 1960s and 1970s] was an inheritance (mainly) from Dewey.”

CLT, then, was not only a product of its Zeitgeist but, as Savignon (1991: 265) notes, derived “from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, at least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research.” Nevertheless, as Brumfit (1978: 34) observed at the time, “to some teachers the arrival of ‘communication’ has come with the force of a revelation.” How was this ‘revelation’ realised in practical terms? What was (and is) communicative teaching like?

CLT in practice

By redefining the goals of language learning in terms of communicative, rather than of linguistic, competence, advocates of CLT compelled teachers to re-think their classroom practices both at the level of overall course and lesson design and in terms of specific activity types and materials, changes that, in turn, prompted a re-evaluation of the teacher’s role. This section reviews the ways that CLT was realised (or was supposed to have been realised) in practice.

At the level of course design, the most salient change was the (admittedly short-lived) shift in focus from a structural syllabus to one whose aims were defined in communicative terms, and specifically as functions and notions (Wilkins, 1972; Van Ek, 1975/1980; Munby, 1978). Thus, in what was effectively the first coursebook by a mainstream publisher to enshrine communicative principles, Abbs et al. (1975) mixed functional, notional and thematic categories in their syllabus. For example:

UNIT 13
Set 1: Imaginary situations
Set 2: Obligation and necessity (present and future)

UNIT 14
Set 1: Obligation and necessity (past)
Set 2: Reasons and consequences

UNIT 15
Set 1: Facts
Set 2: Speculating about the past

(Abbs et al., 1975: 5)

However, the wholesale abandonment of a structural component met some resistance, partly because of the residual conviction that “mastery of the structural system is still the basic requirement for using language to communicate one’s own meanings” (Littlewood, 1981: 77), and a variety of compromise approaches soon emerged. In their Cambridge English Course, Swan and Walter (1984), for example, advocated a multi-strand syllabus, interweaving grammatical, thematic and functional-notional categories, but without necessarily prioritising any, on the grounds that, according to Swan (1990: 89) “it is . . . essential to consider both semantic and formal accounts of the language when deciding what to teach”. By 1986, the tension between ‘semantic and formal accounts’ had been decided categorically in favour of the latter, as evidenced by the publication of the first of the Headway series (Soars and Soars, 1986a and b) and its unapologetically grammar-based syllabus.
More enduring than the functional-notional syllabus was the communicative methodology itself, as implemented through specific classroom activities, particularly those that replicated features of real-life communication. Widdowson (1990: 159) summarises the methodological implications of CLT thus: “The communicative approach reverses the emphasis of the structural. It concentrates on getting learners to do things with language, to express concepts and to carry out communicative acts of various kinds.” “Reversing the emphasis of the structural” suggested, at least to some scholars, that the traditional trajectory, in which the learner progressed from accuracy to fluency, should itself be reversed, or at least conflated, and that classroom instruction should start with “getting learners to do things with language.” After all, as Allwright (1979: 167) had argued, “if communication is THE aim, then it should be THE major element in the process” (emphasis in the original). Brumfit (1979: 188) proposed, therefore, that “a communicative methodology . . . would start from communication, with exercises which constituted communication challenges for students”. This reversed the prevailing instructional model, where communication was seen as an outcome of instruction, and substituted for it a model that began with production, i.e. with learners performing communicative tasks using all their available linguistic and pragmatic resources.

By contrast, in the ‘weak’ version of CLT, as promoted by Littlewood (1981), pre-communicative activities (typically with a structural focus) preceded communicative activities. While allowing that it might be possible, especially at higher levels, to reverse this sequence, Littlewood’s ‘default model’ is one in which mastery of the linguistic systems is viewed as being a precondition for communication. The reversion to the grammar syllabus in the mid-1980s (see below) helped cement this accuracy-to-fluency approach, and most published materials ever since have perpetuated it.

Given the reinstatement of a structural syllabus and a presentation–practice methodology, a sceptic might be forgiven for wondering what, in the end, was new? The answer seems to be that CLT was defined less in terms of curriculum design and more in terms of actual classroom practices. In fact, as Harmer (1982) reasoned, it was erroneous to label a syllabus or even a methodology as being ‘communicative’ per se: only activities can be so. Or, as Larsen-Freeman (2000: 129) notes, “the most obvious characteristic of CLT is that almost everything that is done is done with a communicative intent. Students use the language a great deal through communicative activities such as games, role plays, and problem-solving tasks.” This approach had been spelled out by Abbs and Freebairn (1979: v) in the teachers’ guide to their Strategies series:

If emphasis is placed on learning a language for communicative purposes, the methods used to promote learning should reflect this. . . A communicative methodology will therefore encourage students to practise language in pairs and groups, where they have equal opportunity to ask, answer, initiate and respond. The teacher assumes a counselling role, initiating activity, listening, helping and advising. Students are encouraged to communicate effectively rather than merely to produce grammatically correct forms of English.

Contrasting the attributes of ‘non-communicative’ and communicative activities, Harmer (1982) argued that the latter involve a desire to communicate, have a communicative purpose, are focused on content, not form, require a variety of linguistic resources (rather than being restricted to some targeted feature) and involve little or no teacher intervention or materials control.

Archetypal activities meeting these criteria included information-gap activities of various types, from the relatively controlled, such as describe-and-draw (learners describe a picture to their partners, who recreate it, sight unseen), to freer ‘milling’ activities, such as find-someone-who, whereby learners circulate in order to complete some kind of survey by asking and answering questions. And, in order to practise functional language, role plays and simulations became standard
practice. For similar reasons, the use of authentic reading and listening materials was promoted, and classroom procedures for minimising the difficulties of these – such as the use of skimming and scanning strategies – became commonplace.

Finally, and in order to meet the challenge of managing a ‘communicative’ classroom in which learner interaction is maximised, the teacher’s role was re-envisioned as “a facilitator of learning” (Littlewood, 1981: 92). This less-interventionist teacher role was, of course, perfectly in tune with concurrent tendencies in general education, particularly those influenced by a more learner-centred, humanist learning philosophy (e.g. Stevick, 1976).

In short, Dörnyei (2009: 33) summarises the attributes of CLT in the following terms:

- Activities promote real communication, that is, engage learners in the authentic, functional use of language.
- Classroom communicative situations should resemble real-life communication as much as possible.
- Fluency is more important than accuracy.
- Typical communicative activities are role-plays, discussions, problem-solving tasks, simulations, projects and games.

**CLT and its discontents**

Almost since its inception, CLT has been challenged on a number of grounds, not only in terms of the principles underpinning it but also with regard to its actual practices, including not only their (global) appropriateness and applicability but the way that they might have been (locally) misappropriated and misapplied. This section reviews some of the major criticisms.

From the outset, it became clear that, in the absence of clear specifications as to the learners’ needs, the selection and sequencing of items for a notional-functional syllabus was fairly arbitrary. Unlike grammatical structures, notions and functions could not be easily plotted along a scale from simple to complex, while estimates of their relative frequency or utility were largely hit-and-miss. As we have seen, alternative organising principles for communicative syllabuses, often involving a covert grammatical syllabus, quickly emerged.

A more fundamental criticism, however, targeted the way that communicative competence was being too narrowly interpreted. Brumfit (1978: 41) was one of the first to warn against construing communicative competence as simply a checklist of notions and functions: “No inventory of language items can itself capture the essence of communication.”

Brumfit (1984: 123) went on to argue that any attempt to base a methodology on linguistic description would be counterproductive, on the grounds that “language is impossible to acquire if the product is predefined; what will then be acquired is merely language-like behaviour.” Instead, “the processes of classroom activity, which cannot by definition be described in detail, must be given much greater prominence” (1984: 122 – emphasis in the original). More recently, Leung (2005) has criticised CLT on similar grounds, arguing that construing communicative competence as an inert and stable ‘body of knowledge’ ignores the contingency, fluidity and ‘participatory involvement’ that is the nature of actual communication.

While the foregoing criticisms targeted the ‘reification’ of communicative competence at the expense of the actual processes of communication, a counter-argument soon emerged to the effect that the pressure to be ‘communicative’ may prejudice learners’ ultimate achievement. Studies undertaken in immersion contexts (e.g. Harley and Swain, 1984) suggested that, despite plentiful exposure to comprehensible input, learners failed to acquire a target-like grammar, while studies of learner-learner interaction (e.g. Porter, 1986) challenged the view that pair- and group-work provide a fertile base for acquisition. Based on a study of ‘plateau’ effects in foreign
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language classrooms, Higgs and Clifford (1982: 74) hypothesised that “the premature immersion of a student into an unstructured or ‘free’ conversational setting before certain fundamental linguistic structures are more or less in place is not done without cost”—that cost being an overreliance on communicative strategies at the expense of target-like competence.

Studies such as these cast doubt on the foundational communicative belief that ‘one can learn a language simply by using it’ and compelled a number of scholars to militate for the rehabilitation of more traditional classroom practices, especially those that had been discredited for being too ‘form-focused’. In a famous exchange with Widdowson in the pages of ELT Journal, Swan (1985, reprinted in 1990) argued for (amongst other things) the restoration of the grammar syllabus, while challenging the communicative predilection for authentic materials and information gap activities. As he later argued in 1996, “it does not follow that because students are communicating they are learning English; and some activities (such as learning by heart or mechanical structure-practice) unfashionable because they are totally uncommunicative, may none the less be very valuable” (Swan, 2012: 67).

The rejection of traditional classroom practices is one reason that, in many contexts, there was a reluctance, even refusal, to embrace communicative principles unconditionally. Over the years there has been a steady stream of articles (e.g. Sano et al., 1984; Medgyes, 1986; Burnaby and Sun, 1989; Ellis, 1996; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996; Li, 1998; Hu, 2002; Bax, 2003) challenging CLT’s exportability to contexts beyond those in which it was originally developed. This alleged ‘lack of fit’ has often been attributed to different educational and/or cultural traditions. Thus, Li (1998: 696) argues that “the predominance of text-centred and grammar-centred practices in Korea does not provide a basis for the student-centred, fluency-focused, and problem-solving activities required by CLT”. In a similar vein, Burnaby and Sun (1989) label CLT a ‘Western method’, characterised by its learner-centred approach, the use of authentic materials and an emphasis on spoken communication in accordance with native-speaker models of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. This contrasts with the Chinese educational model, with its emphasis on academic skills, the use of literary texts and a more teacher-fronted pedagogy, where the teachers are almost always non-native speakers of English. Given the Chinese mindset, Xiaoju (1990: 70) concluded that “it is really not surprising that a communicative approach to EFL should meet with stubborn and protracted resistance”. Furthermore, as Medgyes (1986) had earlier argued, the linguistic demands placed on teachers by the more reactive, interactive and learner-centred approach that CLT presupposes necessarily limits its practicability in any context where the majority of teachers are non-native speakers — that is to say, virtually everywhere where English is taught as a foreign language.

Such criticisms have nurtured the belief that CLT represents a form of cultural imperialism whereby, in Holliday’s (2005: 2) formulation, “a well-resourced, politically and economically aggressive, colonising, Western ‘Centre’ imposes its values, standards and beliefs on ‘an undersourced, colonised ‘Periphery’”’. Thus, the emphasis on student-centred learning that is so often associated with CLT is, according to Pennycook (1994: 173) “not only inappropriate to many contexts in which student and teacher roles are defined differently, but it also supports a very particular view of the individual, development and authority”’. Arguably, this ‘particular view’ is one that asserts the primacy of the individual over the group and of self-expression and originality over cultural reproduction and tradition.

Defenders of the universality of CLT have argued, on the other hand, that its critics are construing CLT too narrowly. Holliday (1994a: 165) counters his own critique of inappropriate methodologies by arguing that “much of the bad press which the communicative approach has attracted is due to myths which have been built around it . . . such as ‘communicative equals oral work’, ‘communicative equals group work’ or ‘communicative equals getting rid of the
teacher as a major focus in the classroom”’. In a similar vein, Thompson (1996) identifies four misconceptions about CLT: (a) CLT means not teaching grammar, (b) CLT means teaching only speaking, (c) CLT means pair work, which means role play, and (d) CLT means expecting too much from the teacher (in terms of management and linguistic skills, for example). Thompson not only refutes these misconceptions but argues that the benefits of CLT are too important to risk being jeopardised by ignorance.

More recently, Holliday (2005: 143) has argued that a distinction needs to be made between communicative principles, on the one hand, and communicative teaching methodologies, on the other. While the former may be universally applicable (e.g. ‘Treat language as communication’), the latter may be tailored to specific local contexts, “whereby the curriculum would be sensitive to the broader sociological nature of its ‘ecosystem’” (2005: 147). Thus Hiep (2007: 200) found that, despite the difficulties of implementing CLT in a Vietnamese context, the teachers he surveyed willingly embraced its basic principles. Liao (2004: 270) goes further by arguing that, in the Chinese context, not only the principles but the practices of CLT offer a timely antidote to ‘traditional’ ways of teaching. (For further discussion of the issues surrounding ‘appropriate methodology’, see Holliday, this volume.)

With regard to China and other countries in that region, Beaumont and Chang (2011) argue that the much-cited contradiction between communicative principles and the Confucian educational tradition is a false dichotomy and one that is contradicted by research into the attitudes of both teachers and students in these contexts, who report being favourably disposed to group-work, learner autonomy and interaction (see, for example, Littlewood, 2000). Moreover, as Kubota (1999) argues, stereotyping ‘Asian’ learners as having attitudes and beliefs that are inimical to communicative principles is yet another ‘colonial legacy’, and she cites studies that “challenge cultural representations such as homogeneity, groupism, and lack of self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking found in the current dominant applied linguistics literature” (1999: 25).

Whether or not attributable to cultural, social or linguistic factors, the failure to fully implement CLT in many contexts has defused its initial promise. Nunan (1987: 144), for example, complained that “there is growing evidence that, in communicative classes, interactions may, in fact, not be very communicative after all”. The growing evidence Nunan adduces includes studies that characterise teacher-learner interaction as being almost entirely teacher-led and dominated. In similar vein, Kumaravadivelu (1993: 13) observes: “Even teachers who are committed to CLT can fail to create opportunities for genuine interaction in their classrooms.”

A number of studies have confirmed this discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs about CLT and what they actually do in the classroom. Karavas-Doukas (1996: 193), for example, found that 40 secondary school language teachers in Greece generally held favourable attitudes towards CLT, but, “when the teachers were observed, classroom practices (with very few exceptions) deviated considerably from the principles of the communicative approach. . . . Most lessons were teacher-fronted and exhibited an explicit focus on form.” Other teachers are less favourably disposed: in a study of 10 teachers of Japanese who notionally subscribed to a communicative methodology, Sato and Kleinssasser (1999: 509) found that “the observation data showed reluctance on the part of teachers to promote CLT and indicated that many teachers avoided (or at least challenged or mutated) the few conceptions of CLT that they held.”

Teacher resistance may be partly motivated by resistance on the part of their students. Nunan (1988: 89), for example, reports that, while teachers often voice support for communicative practices, learners tend to favour traditional classroom activities such as grammar exercises. Gattobton and Segalowitz (2005: 327) would seem to concur, arguing that “CLT provides little that is concrete or tangible for students”. This is because (they claim) “there are no provisions in
current CLT methodologies to promote language use to a high level of mastery through repetitive practice. In fact, focused practice continues to be seen as inimical to the inherently open and unpredictable nature of communicative activities”. Accordingly, they suggest ways in which activities that target ‘creative automaticity’ through ‘inherent repetition’ can be integrated into a communicative approach.

Other attempts to redress some of the perceived weaknesses of CLT include Celce-Murcia et al. (1997: 141), who welcome a return to a more ‘direct’ approach to the teaching of communicative competence, “whereby new linguistic information is passed on and practised explicitly”. More recently, Lightbown and Spada (2006) cite research that suggests that an explicit instructional focus combined with overt error correction compensates for the risks of an approach that focuses on communication alone.

Nowhere has this erosion of ‘strong’ communicative principles been more apparent than in general English textbooks. Indeed, it is arguable that the ELT publishing industry has not so much reflected as driven this trend. Certainly, since the publication – and phenomenal global success – of *Headway Intermediate* (Soars and Soars, 1986b), no publisher has attempted to revive the notional-functional syllabi that were so popular in the preceding decade. Rather, we have witnessed what Waters (2011: 321) describes as “the grafting of a communicative ‘veneer’ on to what has remained basically language-focused stock”. And yet, when it was first published, *Headway* was not ashamed of its communicative pedigree: as the authors wrote in the *Teacher’s Book* to the first edition (Soars and Soars, 1986b: iv): “*Headway* incorporates and encourages what is generally considered to be a communicative methodology.” However, by the time the elementary level book in the series was published (Soars and Soars, 1993), the authors’ commitment to a communicative approach had become somewhat qualified: “There is almost an assumption that nobody learned a language successfully before the arrival of the communicative approach” (Soars and Soars, 1993: 4). Accordingly, they were now advocating an approach in which new language “needs to be practised not only in communicative, meaningful ways but in drills and exercises where the language is used for display purposes only” (ibid.). This concession to ‘non-communicative’ practices reflects Harmer’s earlier call for a judicious balance between “the drill and the discussion” (1982: 164).

The increasingly prominent grammar focus of the *Headway* series has persisted into subsequent editions, as Waters (2012) observes, and it is a trend that continues unabated in all mainstream ELT publishing, despite a plea on the part of some ‘revivalists’ (e.g. Meddings and Thornbury, 2009) to resuscitate CLT’s prelapsarian values.

**Conclusion**

Is it true, then, that, as Thornbury (1998: 113) puts it, “CLT – both in its weak and in its strong version – has had little impact on current classroom practice” and that, in Swan’s (1990: 98) words, “it is likely to be seen as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching”? Or is it the case that, as Harmer (2007: 71) claims, “the Communicative approach has left an indelible mark on teaching and learning”?

In fact, it may be the case that the concept of ‘method’ itself has been, if not interred, at least problematised (see Hall, this volume, ch. 15) and that the notion of a monolithic, universally applicable approach, as embodied in CLT, is incompatible with the diversity of contexts, interests, purposes and technologies that characterise the teaching of second languages nowadays.

Moreover, the socio-economic landscape is very different now than it was in the 1970s. The ‘marketisation’ of education (Gray and Block, 2012: 121) and its associated concepts of ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘accountability’ have shifted the focus from
‘communication’ to ‘commodification’; “in such an educational climate, students are increasingly seen as customers seeking a service and schools and teachers are, as a consequence, seen as service providers” (ibid.). Language learning, like other subjects, has become commodified, and the measure of its success is less communicative competence than the results of high-stakes testing. In such an educational climate, concepts so fundamental to CLT as authenticity, fluency, discovery and collaboration seem outmoded or, at best, ‘add-ons’ for those who can afford the luxury of small classes of communicatively motivated learners. More likely, however, and given the appeal that still attaches to the word ‘communicative’, CLT will continue to prosper as a brand, even though its original ingredients may have long since been reconstituted. In the end, as Holliday (1994b: 10) argues, CLT was itself a development from previous methodologies, “and further improvement can only be achieved by further development, not by going back”.

Discussion questions

• “Everything is ‘communicative’ these days” (Harmer, 1982: 164). Is this still the case? Is CLT still the current orthodoxy? If not, what is?
• How far do you think that a language can be taught simply by using it? In what ways are your views reflected in your classroom practice (as a teacher) or your preferences (as a learner)?
• If CLT is defined less by its theoretical foundations and more by its actual classroom practices, what CLT practices do you think are definitive?
• To what extent do you agree that the principles that underpin CLT have had little impact on current classroom practice?
• Is CLT a ‘Western-centred’ method, in your view? How far is it appropriate in your professional context?
• If further improvement of CLT can be achieved only by further development, what developments should we be looking forward to? For example, how can CLT accommodate developments in educational technology?

Related topics

Appropriate methodology; ELT materials; Language curriculum design; Method, methods and methodology; Task-based language teaching.

Further reading

Harmer, J. (2015) The practice of English language teaching (5th ed.). Harlow: Pearson. (This is a comprehensive manual of classroom practice that is firmly anchored in communicative principles.)
Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (2014) Approaches and methods in language teaching (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This is an updated version of a core text describing methods, including CLT, in terms of their underlying principles as well as their surface practices.)

References

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