



Essentials for Successful English Language Teaching

Thomas S. C. Farrell and George M. Jacobs



Continuum International Publishing Group

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane
Suite 704, New York
NY 10038

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-8470-6441-7 (hardback)
978-1-8470-6442-4 (paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Book Group Ltd

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Introduction

Since the 1970s communicative language teaching has been one of the most popular teaching methodologies around the world in second language education. Before that, the more traditional teaching methods (e.g., Audio-Lingual Method; Grammar-Translation Method) that were employed focused more on

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producing accurate, grammatically correct target language. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) however began to change the emphasis to where learners produce the language with a focus on fluency and where errors are seen as being a part of development. In traditional classes, teachers were seen as the knowledge providers and sole controllers of the class. In the approach English language teachers share this control and “facilitate” learning rather than dispense knowledge. So CLT represents a major change and is considered one of the main approaches to second language education today (Richards, 2005). Jacobs and Farrell (2001, 2003) label this major change in teaching and learning a second language a *paradigm shift* because in order to successfully implement the CLT approach we must shift our thinking about teachers, students, learning, and teaching a second language. The idea of the shift in focus is illustrated by the story of the “Cricket and the Coin.”

One pleasant summer day at lunch time two colleagues, A and B, were walking along a busy street in Atlanta when A turned to B and said, “Do you hear that cricket across the street?” to which B replied, “How could I possibly hear a cricket with all this traffic.” Her colleague confidently said, “Let’s cross the street and I’ll show you.” They carefully made their way through the traffic to a flower box on the other side where, sure enough, there was a cricket. B was astounded. “How could you hear a little cricket amid all this noise? You must have super-human hearing!” “The key,” A explained, “is not how well we hear but what we listen for.” To illustrate, she took a coin from her purse, threw it in the air, and let it drop on the sidewalk. Soon, the sound of braking vehicles filled the air, as cars came to a halt. Drivers and pedestrians turned to look for the rattling coin. As A reached to retrieve her coin, B smiled and said, “Now, I see what you mean; it’s all a matter of focus.”

This chapter outlines and describes eight essentials of second language education that fit with the CLT paradigm shift. The subsequent eight chapters of this book then focus on one of the eight essentials and the final chapter concludes the discussion. These eight essentials are: encourage Learner Autonomy, emphasize the Social Nature of Learning, develop Curricular Integration, Focus on Meaning, celebrate Diversity, expand Thinking Skills, utilize Alternative Assessment methods, and promote English language Teachers as Co-learners. We argue that in second language education, although the CLT paradigm shift was initiated many years ago, it really has been only partially implemented. Two reasons for this partial implementation are: (1) by trying to understand each essential separately, second language educators have weakened their understanding by missing the larger picture; and (2) by trying

to implement each essential separately, second language educators have made the difficult task of shift or change even more challenging. We now give a brief orientation to CLT and how we should really understand and implement it as a real paradigm shift.

Communicative language teaching

CLT can be seen as a set of “principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the class-room” (Richards, 2005, p. 1). CLT has been the “in” approach to second language education since its beginning in the early 1970s, and has now become the driving force that affects the planning, implementation, and evaluation of English Language Teaching (ELT) throughout the world (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). That said, not many English language teachers or second language educators are in agreement or even clear in their own minds as to what exactly CLT is, and there exist as many diverse interpretations as there are language teachers and second language educators. This wide variation in implementation of CLT is not, as we discuss in the chapter on celebrating Diversity, necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it is a natural product of the range of contexts in which second language learning takes place and the range of experiences that students, teachers, and other stakeholders bring with them.

In its early inception CLT was seen as an approach to teaching English as a second or foreign language for the purposes of enabling second language learners to be able to use language functionally, meaningfully and appropriately, instead of the previous emphasis on correctness (e.g., Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). However, over the years ESL and EFL teachers have interpreted a CLT approach to language teaching in many different ways with many thinking that the teacher just forms groups in their classes and let the students practice speaking the second language. The end result that teachers using this approach were seeking was that their students become competent in speaking that second language. Richards (2005) calls this *phase 1* of the CLT movement and he says it continued until the late 1960s. In phase 1 the previous traditional approaches that gave priority to grammatical competence as a foundation for language proficiency gave way to functional and skill-based teaching that had a “fluency over accuracy” pedagogical purpose. The next phase of CLT according to Richards (2005) was the classic CLT period from the 1970s to the 1990s.

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In this phase, the place of grammar in instruction was questioned because it seemed to result only in grammatical competence that produced grammatically correct sentences under controlled conditions but did not, according to many, improve oral production or aid the communicative use of language. So what was really called for at that time was communicative competence where students could actually communicate orally in the second language; for example, Hymes (1972) suggested that Chomsky's ideal native speaker with linguistic competence include the sociolinguistic component of communicative competence of *knowledge of* and *ability for* language use with respect to four factors: "possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and accepted usage" (p. 19). More recently, Richards (2005, p. 1) suggests that communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
- knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g. knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication)
- knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g. narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)
- knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g. through using different kinds of communication strategies).

Since the 1990s CLT has continued to evolve by drawing from different educational paradigms and diverse sources with the result that as Richards (2005, p. 24) maintains, there is still "no single or agreed upon set of practices that characterize current communicative language teaching." Rather, he suggests that communicative language teaching these days refers to "a set of generally agreed upon principles that can be applied in different ways, depending on the teaching context, the age of the learners, their level, their learning goals." In addition, Brown (2000) has maintained that CLT should include the following:

- Classroom goals are focused on all the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.
- Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes.
- Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques.
- In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. (p. 266)

Richards (2005) maintains that if we ask ESL/EFL teachers today who say they follow the CLT approach what exactly they do, or what they mean by “communicative,” their explanations will vary widely, from an absence of grammar in a conversation course, to a focus on open-ended discussion activities. In our view, the key problem lies in the fact that not enough teachers are implementing CLT and some of those who do implement it have done so too infrequently, too often returning to the traditional paradigm. Later in this chapter, we examine reasons for this.

Understanding communicative language teaching

In second language education, the CLT paradigm shift over the past 40 years, which Long (1997) likens to a revolution, flows from the positivism to post-positivism shift in science (see also Chapter 10) and involves a move away from the tenets of behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics and toward cognitive, and later, socio-cognitive psychology and more contextualized, meaning-based views of language. Key components on this shift concern:

1. Focusing greater attention on the role of learners rather than the external stimuli learners are receiving from their environment. Thus, the center of attention shifts from the teacher to the student. This shift is generally known as the move from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered or learning-centered instruction.
2. Focusing greater attention on the learning process rather than on the products that learners produce. This shift is known as a move from product-oriented instruction to process-oriented instruction.
3. Focusing greater attention on the Social Nature of Learning rather than on students as separate, decontextualized individuals.
4. Focusing greater attention on Diversity among learners and viewing these differences not as impediments to learning but as resources to be recognized, catered to, and appreciated. This shift is known as the study of individual differences.
5. In research and theory-building, focusing greater attention on the views of those internal to the classroom rather than solely valuing the views of those who come from outside to study classrooms, investigate and evaluate what goes on there, and engage in theorizing about it. This shift is associated with such innovations as qualitative research, which highlights the subjective and affective, the participants’ insider views, and the uniqueness of each context.

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6. Along with this emphasis on context comes the idea of connecting the school with the world beyond as a means of promoting holistic learning.
7. Helping students understand the purpose of learning and developing their own purposes.
8. A whole-to-part orientation instead of a part-to-whole approach. This involves such approaches as beginning with meaningful whole texts and then helping students understand the various features that enable the texts to function, e.g., the choice of words and the text's organizational structure.
9. An emphasis on the importance of meaning rather than drills and other forms of rote learning.
10. A view of learning as a life-long process rather than something done to prepare for an exam.

As mentioned earlier, the CLT paradigm shift in second language education is part of a larger shift that affected many other fields (See Voght, 2000 for a discussion of parallels between paradigm shifts in foreign language education at U.S. universities and paradigm shifts in education programs in business and other professions). Oprandy (1999) links trends in second language education with those in the field of city planning. He likens behaviorism's top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to education to a similar trend in city planning in which outside experts designed for uniformity and attempted to do away with Diversity. In response, a new paradigm arose in city planning, a bottom-up one that sought to zone for Diversity. Describing the current paradigm in second language education, Oprandy writes:

The communicative approach requires a complexity in terms of planning and a tolerance for messiness and ambiguity as teachers analyze students' needs and design meaningful tasks to meet those needs. The pat solutions and deductive stances of audiolingual materials and pedagogy, like the grammar-translation texts and syllabi preceding them, are no longer seen as sensitive to students' needs and interests. Nor are they viewed as respectful of students' intelligence to figure things out inductively through engaging problem-solving and communicative tasks. (p. 44)

Another parallel that Oprandy draws between new ideas in city planning and new ideas in second language education have to do with the role of the subjective. In city planning, attention began to focus on people's need for a sense of security and belonging in people-centered cities. These concerns, as Oprandy suggests, are matched in second language education by the desire to

facilitate an atmosphere in which students are willing to take risks, to admit mistakes, and to help one another.

Implementing communicative language teaching

The CLT paradigm shift in second language education outlined above has led to many suggested changes in how English as a second/foreign language teaching is conducted and conceived (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Our objective in writing this book is to argue that the CLT paradigm shift has not been implemented as widely or as successfully as it might have been because English language educators and other stakeholders have tried to understand and implement the shift in a piecemeal rather than a holistic manner. Thus, we suggest that English as a second/foreign language educators consider eight major changes associated with this shift because of the impact they already have had on the language education field and for the potential impact they could have if they were used in a more integrated fashion.

We selected these eight because we see them as essential, still in progress, and interlinked with one another. By helping to promote the understanding and use of these eight elements, we hope this book will provide teachers with a handy, user-friendly resource. Certainly, other related elements of good learning and teaching also deserve attention.

First, we briefly explain each essential (we later devote a whole chapter to each essential), explore links between the essential and the larger paradigm shift and look at various second language classroom implications and then we devote an individual chapter to each essential. These eight essentials are:

1. Encourage Learner Autonomy
2. Emphasize Social Nature of Learning
3. Develop Curricular Integration
4. Focus on Meaning
5. Celebrate Diversity
6. Expand Thinking Skills
7. Utilize Alternative Assessment Methods
8. Promote English Language Teachers as Co-learners.

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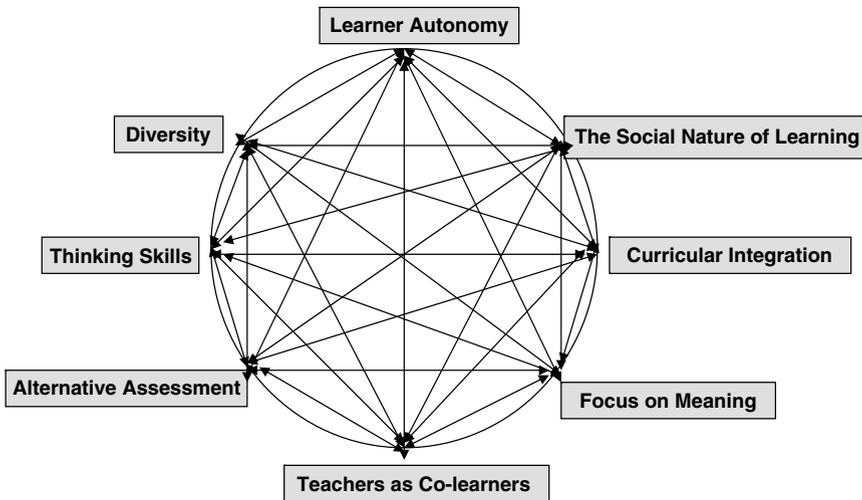


Figure 1.1 Eight essentials for successful second language teaching

Figure 1.1 provides an illustration of the interdependence of these eight essentials of the paradigm shift in second language education. The circular nature of the figure emphasizes that all the changes are parts of a whole and that the successful implementation of one is dependent on the successful implementation of others.

This book focuses on these eight essentials in second language education, the links between the eight, and, most importantly, how these essentials are being used and can be implemented. We hope this book contributes in some small way to encouraging fuller development of these and related essentials. The eight essentials are briefly explained as follows.

Learner autonomy

Within a CLT approach to second language education we focus more on the role of learners rather than the external stimuli learners receive from their environment, such as from teachers and materials. In other words, the center of attention in learning English as a second/foreign language has shifted from the teacher and materials (the external) to the student (the internal). This shift is generally known as the move from teacher-centered instruction to learner (or student)-centered instruction. Learner Autonomy is a key concept here: learners have an important share of the responsibility for and control over their own learning. Chapter 2 outlines this first essential in CLT in more detail.

The social nature of learning

As the name suggests, to be social in learning we mean some form of interaction and cooperation is necessary within a CLT approach to second language education. We focus greater attention on the Social Nature of Learning English as a second/foreign language rather than on students as separate, decontextualized individuals. To understand and promote learning, we look not only at individuals but also at the people who make up their world and the connections between them. These people include not only teachers but also peers and others such as administrators and people in the outside community. Cooperation is valued over competition without excluding the latter completely. When students collaborate they all play leadership roles. Chapter 3 outlines this essential in CLT in more detail.

Curricular integration

Curricular Integration refers to a second language pedagogical approach which fuses knowledge from different disciplines to create more meaningful contexts for overall learning. The traditional fragmentation of content by disciplines assumes that students will recognize the links between the disciplines on their own, but this can be difficult for second language students whose main focus may be the language rather than the content. However, with a CLT approach to teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language the integrated approach purposefully and systematically guides second language students toward discovering these connections and processes; connections and processes that help ESL/EFL students better understand themselves and the world around them. In the highest form, this student-centered approach uses real-life issues and varied resources to bring students as close to the “real thing” as possible. Furthermore, integration can also include integrating the various language skills, as well as integrating the academic with the social and emotional. Chapter 4 outlines this essential in CLT in more detail.

Focus on meaning

For this essential we focus on learning English as a second/foreign language for purposes other than just passing an exam. Education is not just preparation for life; it is also participation in life. Students understand the purposes of learning and develop their own purposes for learning regardless of the subject. Within learning English as a second/foreign language we suggest that

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understanding also involves our students' comprehension of what they are learning rather than learning by rote learning methods such as drills so that they can be educated as complete human beings. Chapter 5 explains this essential in a CLT approach to second language education in more detail.

Diversity

First of all, we celebrate Diversity among our second language learners and we see this diversity as a plus in our English as a second/foreign language classes. We focus on discerning, taking into account, and appreciating differences among our second language learners within a CLT approach to language education; thus we consider all second language (indeed all students) to be unique. This uniqueness includes differences not only in first language backgrounds, but also in intelligence profile, personality, and such other background factors as race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sex, and sexual preference. We suggest in this CLT concept that no standard, one-size-fits-all way of teaching a second language exists, and that differences of opinion and perspective offer opportunities for learning rather than being cause for winner-take-all conflict. Chapter 6 outlines this essential in CLT in more detail.

Thinking skills

For this CLT essential we focus on how students learn by a process of expanding their Thinking Skills rather than looking only at what they produce. This emphasis on process rather than just on end-product encourages second language students and teachers to promote reflection on one's thinking, to encourage deeper critical thinking, and more varied ways of solving problems, and to gain sense of greater questioning of how things are done. With an appreciation of the complexity, uncertainty, nonlinearity, and instability of knowledge in learning a second language, students not only come to see change as a constant but also that learning a second language (and learning in general) is a life-long process; indeed, we suggest that disruption and surprise are to be welcomed while learning. Chapter 7 outlines this essential in CLT in more detail.

Alternative assessment

We should point out immediately that when we say alternative we are not "throwing out the baby with the bathwater" because we still see the place of more traditional testing; it is just that now we want to suggest that English as a

second/foreign language teachers and administrators take into account that not all our second language learners may respond to such testing in a manner that compliments their different cultural backgrounds and that we have alternative means of assessment that may be more suitable. So within a CLT approach to second language education we recognize that while standardized, objective-item tests do provide relevant information, sole reliance on such measures blinds us to a great deal of what is important in education. We suggest that more Alternative Assessments connect closely with real world purposes. Furthermore, this type of assessment is done not mainly by outsiders but more importantly by those actually in the classroom (peers) who grasp the particular context in all its complexity. Thus Alternative Assessment includes students assessing themselves, peers, and the “how” and “what” of their English as a second/foreign language learning. Additionally, Alternative Assessment focuses on what second language students can do rather than on what they cannot do. Chapter 8 outlines this essential in more detail.

Teachers as co-learners

The final concept within the eight essentials for successful implementation of CLT focuses on language teachers not principally as possessors of knowledge that is to be passed on to students; instead, teachers learn along with second language students because knowledge is dynamic and learning is a life-long process. Teachers learn with their students, and they learn along with their fellow teachers. Based on this learning, teachers join students in playing a greater role in such matters as materials design and institutional governance. Chapter 9 outlines this concept in more detail.

Eight essentials for successful English language teaching

Figure 1.1, shown earlier, suggests that the eight essential changes (outlined and discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters) are related and connected to one another. For example, the Social Nature of Learning connects with Learner Autonomy because by working in groups second language students become less dependent on teachers and more interdependent with each other. Curriculum Integration is facilitated by student–student interaction because second language students can pool their energies and knowledge to take on

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cross-curricular projects. The Social Nature of Learning element fits with an emphasis on meaning, as groups provide an excellent forum for students to engage in meaningful communication in their second language. The Diversity element provides mutual support for the Social Nature of Learning when students form heterogeneous groups and use collaborative skills to bring out and value the ideas and experiences of all the group members.

The Social Nature of Learning also provides an excellent venue for the use of the Thinking Skills element, as second language students attempt to explain concepts and procedures to their groupmates, as groupmates give each other feedback, and as they debate the proper course of action. The Alternative Assessment element synergizes with the Social Nature of Learning in several ways. For instance, cooperative learning provides scope for peer assessment, and an emphasis on the development of collaborative skills calls for different methods to assess these skills. Finally, the elements of Teachers as Co-learners go together with the Social Nature of Learning for at least two reasons. First, teachers often work with colleagues to learn more about education, e.g., by conducting action research and otherwise discussing their classes. By collaborating with fellow teachers, teachers model collaboration for their students and convince themselves of its benefits. Second, because cooperative learning means that teachers talk less, it allows teachers to get off the stage some of the time and spend more time facilitating student learning as well as their own learning. One of the techniques for this facilitation is to take part along with students, thus encouraging teachers to learn more.

Teaching English as a second/foreign language

“Communicative Language Teaching” is probably the answer given most frequently when English as a second/foreign language teachers are asked what approach they use to teach in their own classes, what they think is most successful and indeed, what the most popular approach is used by most teachers today. Although we all assume that we have the same understanding about what successful English as a second/foreign language instruction and CLT means and that we all implement CLT in the same way, the reality is far from a unified understanding or implementation in most second language classrooms. In fact, what we have noticed is that there seems to be a great deal of variation between countries, institutions within

the same country, and even classrooms within the same institution when it comes to definitions of successful language instruction, and that the so-called paradigm shift in second language instruction toward CLT seems to be gradual, evolutionary, and piecemeal. There seem to be several reasons for this slow evolution within second language education.

One reason may be that changing beliefs and behaviors takes time in education and elsewhere (Fullan, 2008). Lack of change may also be a result of the difficulty of translating theory into practical application. That is, new ideas need a great deal of work by practicing teachers for these ideas to be translated into everyday teaching routines. Furthermore, one teacher working alone has much less change power than do groups of educators, including administrators and school district staff working together. Another possible explanation stems from a lack of understanding of what CLT is and the resulting fact that it has often been presented in a piecemeal fashion, rather than as a whole. In other words, many ESL/EFL teachers may have just started practicing immediately those parts of the CLT approach that they learned and that seemed most congenially implemented given the constraints faced by an individual teacher without understanding what exactly the CLT approach means. So the point of this book has been to reignite the CLT fires and to argue that in order to implement CLT as a successful approach to English as a second/foreign language education, we must realize that it should take a holistic perspective which has two main implications.

1. First, the changes are *ALL* related.
2. Second, when we attempt to implement these changes, if we do so in a piecemeal fashion, selecting changes as if they were items on an a la carte menu, we lessen the chances of success.

Thus, these innovations all fit together, like the pieces in a pattern cut to make a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece supports the others, and each builds on the others as outlined in Figure 1.1 above.

Conclusion

In this chapter (and throughout this book) we have urged our fellow second language educators to take a big picture approach to the changes in our approach to understanding and implementing CLT. We have argued that many of these essential changes stem from a previous underlying paradigm

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shift toward CLT that continues today. By examining this shift and looking for connections between various changes in our field, these changes can be better understood. Most importantly, by attempting to implement change in a holistic way, the chances of success greatly increase. This point has been made countless times in works on systems theory by Senge (2000), Wheatley (2006), and others. However, it is much easier to state in theory than to implement in practice. Perhaps the best-known and most painful example of the failure to implement holistic change in second language education is that in many cases while teaching methodology has become more communicative, testing remains within the traditional paradigm, consisting of discrete items, lower-order thinking, and a focus on form rather than meaning (Brown, 2000). This creates a backwash effect that tends to pull teaching back toward the traditional paradigm, even when teachers and others are striving to go toward the new paradigm.

Second language education plays an ever more important role as globalization, for better or worse, marches forward. Perhaps this is where the eighth change we discussed, Teachers as Co-learners (see Chapter 9), plays the crucial role. Many people are drawn to work in second language education because they enjoy learning languages and want to share this joy with others. All the changes that have taken place in our field challenge us to continue learning about our profession and to share what we learn with others, including our colleagues, so that we can continue to help our field develop. We hope you enjoy reading the next eight chapters that detail the eight essential and interconnected changes that are necessary for successful English as a second/foreign language instruction.