

# Communicative Language Teaching Today

---

Jack C. Richards



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

© Cambridge University Press 2006

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

Communicative Language Teaching Today is distributed with permission from SEAMEO Regional Language Centre and is part of the Portfolio series by SEAMEO Regional Language Centre which holds the copyright to this material.

First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN-13 978-0-521-92512-9 paperback

Book layout services: Page Designs International

# *Table of Contents*

Introduction 1

- 1 What Is Communicative Language Teaching? 2
  - 2 The Background to CLT 6
  - 3 Classroom Activities in Communicative Language Teaching 14
  - 4 Current Trends in Communicative Language Teaching 22
  - 5 Process-Based CLT Approaches – Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Instruction 27
  - 6 Product-Based CLT Approaches – Text-Based Instruction and Competency-Based Instruction 36
- Conclusions 45
- References 46



## *Introduction*

The ever-growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world. Millions of people today want to improve their command of English or to ensure that their children achieve a good command of English. And opportunities to learn English are provided in many different ways such as through formal instruction, travel, study abroad, as well as through the media and the Internet. The worldwide demand for English has created an enormous demand for quality language teaching and language teaching materials and resources. Learners set themselves demanding goals. They want to be able to master English to a high level of accuracy and fluency. Employers, too, insist that their employees have good English language skills, and fluency in English is a prerequisite for success and advancement in many fields of employment in today's world. The demand for an appropriate teaching methodology is therefore as strong as ever.

In this booklet we will examine the methodology known as *communicative language teaching*, or CLT, and explore the assumptions it is based on, its origins and evolution since it was first proposed in the 1970s, and how it has influenced approaches to language teaching today. Since its inception in the 1970s, CLT has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practice around the world. Many of the issues raised by a communicative teaching methodology are still relevant today, though teachers who are relatively new to the profession may not be familiar with them. This booklet therefore serves to review what we have learned from CLT and what its relevance is today.

# 1

## *What Is Communicative Language Teaching?*

Perhaps the majority of language teachers today, when asked to identify the methodology they employ in their classrooms, mention “communicative” as the methodology of choice. However, when pressed to give a detailed account of what they mean by “communicative,” explanations vary widely. Does communicative language teaching, or 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? What do you understand by communicative language teaching?

---

### **Task 1**

Which of the statements below do you think characterizes communicative language teaching?

1. People learn a language best when using it to do things rather than through studying how language works and practicing rules.
  2. Grammar is no longer important in language teaching.
  3. People learn a language through communicating in it.
  4. Errors are not important in speaking a language.
  5. CLT is only concerned with teaching speaking.
  6. Classroom activities should be meaningful and involve real communication.
  7. Dialogs are not used in CLT.
  8. Both accuracy and fluency are goals in CLT.
  9. CLT is usually described as a method of teaching.
- 

Communicative language teaching can be understood 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 classroom. Let us examine each of these issues in turn.

### **The Goals of Language Teaching**

Communicative language teaching sets as its goal the teaching of *communicative competence*. What does this term mean? Perhaps we can clarify this term by first comparing it with the concept of *grammatical competence*. Grammatical

competence refers to the knowledge we have of a language that accounts for our ability to produce sentences in a language. It refers to knowledge of the building blocks of sentences (e.g., parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) and how sentences are formed. Grammatical competence is the focus of many grammar practice books, which typically present a rule of grammar on one page, and provide exercises to practice using the rule on the other page. The unit of analysis and practice is typically the sentence. While grammatical competence is an important dimension of language learning, it is clearly not all that is involved in learning a language since one can master the rules of sentence formation in a language and still not be very successful at being able to use the language for meaningful communication. It is the latter capacity which is understood by the term communicative competence.

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)

---

## Task 2

Consider the following sentences that are all requests for someone to open a door. Imagine that the context is normal communication between two friends. Check if you think they conform to the rules of grammatical competence (GC), communicative competence (CC), or both.

	<b>GC</b>	<b>CC</b>
Please to opens door.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I want the door to be opened by you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would you be so terribly kind as to open the door for me?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Could you open the door?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To opening the door for me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would you mind opening the door?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The opening of the door is what I request.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

---

## How Learners Learn a Language

Our understanding of the processes of second language learning has changed considerably in the last 30 years and CLT is partly a response to these changes in understanding. Earlier views of language learning focused primarily on the mastery of grammatical competence. Language learning was viewed as a process of mechanical habit formation. Good habits are formed by having students produce correct sentences and not through making mistakes. Errors were to be avoided through controlled opportunities for production (either written or spoken). By memorizing dialogs and performing drills, the chances of making mistakes were minimized. Learning was very much seen as under the control of the teacher.

In recent years, language learning has been viewed from a very different perspective. It is seen as resulting from processes such as:

- Interaction between the learner and users of the language
- Collaborative creation of meaning
- Creating meaningful and purposeful interaction through language
- Negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor arrive at understanding
- Learning through attending to the feedback learners get when they use the language
- Paying attention to the language one hears (the input) and trying to incorporate new forms into one's developing communicative competence
- Trying out and experimenting with different ways of saying things

## The Kinds of Classroom Activities That Best Facilitate Learning

With CLT began a movement away from traditional lesson formats where the focus was on mastery of different items of grammar and practice through controlled activities such as memorization of dialogs and drills, and toward the use of pair work activities, role plays, group work activities and project work. These are discussed in Chapter 3.

---

### Task 3

Examine a classroom text, either a speaking text or a general English course book. Can you find examples of exercises that practice grammatical competence and those that practice communicative competence? Which kinds of activities predominate?

---



## The Roles of Teachers and Learners in the Classroom

The type of classroom activities proposed in CLT also implied new roles in the classroom for teachers and learners. Learners now had to participate in classroom activities that were based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. Students had to become comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model. They were expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning. And teachers now had to assume the role of facilitator and monitor. Rather than being a model for correct speech and writing and one with the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences, the teacher had to develop a different view of learners' errors and of her/his own role in facilitating language learning.

---

### Task 4

What difficulties might students and teachers face because of changes in their roles in using a communicative methodology?

---