

Role of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Improving the Communicative Competence of the Second Language Learners of English

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Abstract

Communication is a key of human existence. In the current global scenario the need and role of communication has grown manifold. This has a great impact on the teaching and learning of language skills around the globe. Needless to say that English language is most widely used for official communications globally. But the irony here is that, for most of the people who speak English, it is not their native language. English serves as their second or third language. David (2004) writes, by 2003, the non-native speakers of English outnumbered the native speakers by the ratio 3:1. The learning of a language as a second language (L2) varies a lot from the acquisition of first language (L1). Hence, it is necessary to formulate a teaching method that suits the requirements of the L2 learners of the language. Several learning theories and teaching methods have been developed to enhance the language teaching and learning output. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the most recent teaching method that is claimed to be the best method to teach English (any language for that matter) to improve the communicative competence of the learners. This paper presents a detailed discussion of the implications of CLT for the development of communication skills of the learners who learn English as a second language.

Keywords: *CLT, communicative competence, native and non-native speakers, learning theories, teaching method*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Communication has been a key for human existence and evolution over time. In the current era, good communication skill plays a vital role in accomplishing professional goals. Hence, everyone strives to acquire better language skills. The language that is most widely used in the world is English. However, it is not the first language for most of the users of the language. According to David (2004), the non-native speakers of English outnumbered the native speakers by the ratio 3:1 by 2003. The communicative competency in any language is highly dependent on the learning process. There is huge difference in the learning process of the native or first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Saville-Toike (2012) has clarified the distinction between these two terms L1 and L2. Saville-Toike refers to L1 as the native language, primary language, and mother tongue. L1 is normally the language which is learnt during early childhood. The acquisition of L1 usually happens in the process of growing up with the people who speak the same language. L2 refers to the language that is learnt after learning one language. However, the term L2 may refer to the third, fourth, or the eighth language to be acquired. L1 is acquired naturally from the surrounding and it happens at an early age where as second language learning may happen at any stage of life and the learning process is different from L1 acquisition. The study of the process of learning of second language is known as Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) remark that SLA is the study of the process of non-native speakers' growing proficiency in English on the basis of various language acquisition theories (Brown, 2007; Richard-Amato, 2003; Valdes, Capitelli, & Alvarez, 2011). Lightbown & Spada (2006) describe that L2 learner differs from an L1 learner in terms of the learners' characteristics and the environments where L1 and L2 learning occur. Researchers have developed various theories to describe the process of language learning. These theories form the base of the language teaching methods from time to time. The current study focuses on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method and its role in improving the communicative skills of the second language learners of English. Communicative language teaching gained popularity as a teaching method towards the end of the twentieth century. This is based on the interactionist theory of learning. This method is claimed to be the most effective method for the second language learners of English.

II. LEARNING THEORIES AND CLT

The process of learning language has been an area of interest for the researchers in various fields like, psychologists, sociologists, linguists, psycholinguists, sociolinguists, etc. Various studies have been undertaken to study the similarities and the differences between the learning of the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Researchers have debated over this issue for long with the help of different theoretical models such as Behaviourist, Innatist and Interactionist to explain the phenomena of L1 acquisition and L2 learning (O'Grady & Cho, 2011). The study of language acquisition, whether first or second language, has been greatly influenced by these three major theories. The prominent figures of these schools of thought are Skinner, Chomsky, and Vygotsky respectively. Each of these theories has highlighted the role of a specific aspect in the process of language acquisition. For example-Behaviourist theory emphasizes the role of the environment, focusing on the concepts of imitation and habit-formation. The innatist theory considers the role of human mind and cognitive processes to be the main reason in language learning. Interactionist approach emerged in the 19th century as a reaction to the previous theories of learning. It took the advantage of both the behaviourist and innatist theories to emphasize the role of social interaction in language learning. According to this approach, learners should be presented with comprehensible input through negotiation or modification in order to enable them to learn the language. Lightbown and Spada (1999) describe the emphasis given by the interactionists to the role of the modification of interaction in conversations to be the primary means to language acquisition.

The interactionist approach towards teaching brought about a vast change in the language teaching in SLA. Researchers like Swan and Walter (1990) advocated for the inclusion of real life contexts and real communicative interactions. Citing the functional view of the second language learning Mitchell & Myles (2004) state that the second language teaching should provide the students with opportunities where they try to make meaning and attain their own communicative purposes instead of focusing on teaching the structures. Linguists such as Candlin (1976) and Widdowson (1972), functional linguist as Firth (1957) and Halliday (1973) and sociolinguists as Hymes (1972) and Labov (1972) advocated that language teaching should focus more on improving communicative proficiency. Wilkin (1972) also supported the communicative view of language teaching and worked towards developing Communicative Language Teaching syllabus. The research work of these scholars laid the foundation stone for the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (Richards and Rogers, 1986) under the interactionist language theory.

CLT as a teaching method resulted out of the rejection of previously accepted methods and approaches. Thompson (1996) asserts that CLT is widely used as the dominant paradigm in language teaching. The notional-functional language theorists like Wilkins (1972), Halliday (1975), and Hymes (1967/1974) state that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focuses on learning language to communicate various notions of language such as time, sequence, quantity, location, and frequency and for performing specific functions such as requests, denials, offers, complaints. Baco Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) pointing out the complementary nature approaches stated that communication as the ultimate goal of language learning is gained through communication in interactive discussions with others. This phenomenon proves that CLT follows the interactionist theory of learning and is essential for effective second language teaching.

CLT employs three basic practices that highlight the underlying learning theory. CLT works on the principle of communication, the task principle and the meaningfulness principle. The communicative principle advocates that activities involving real communication promote learning. The task principle says that activities that require the use of language to carry out meaningful task promote learning (Johnson 1982). The meaningfulness principle says that meaningful use of language supports learning. Hence, it is argued that the activities for CLT should be selected according to how better they involve the students in meaningful and authentic language use. The principles of CLT practices provide the conditions required for second language learning.

III. GOALS OF CLT

Ahmed (2016) points out seven functions of CLT which highlight communicative focus of the CLT method. Ahmed mentions that CLT prepares students for real life communication by providing them the required communicative skills, employs them in learner –oriented collaborative activities, goes beyond classroom to develop communicative skills of the students, emphasizes on fluency than accuracy, balances between form and function, mixes organizational and pragmatic aspects of language and focuses on the improvement of the communicative competence of the learners. One of the goals of CLT is to improve the fluency and accuracy of the learners. Whong (2013) and Alakrash and Razak (2020b) define fluency as “the natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in a meaningful interaction and maintains the comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence”.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF CLT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Any teaching and learning process involves teachers, learners, syllabus, teaching material, activities to be conducted in the class, and testing to measure the teaching outcome. The following section presents a detailed discussion of the implication of CLT theory for these factors of teaching and learning.

Role of the teacher

Different theorists have assigned different roles for the teachers in communicative classrooms, but the basic function that these roles demand from a teacher is the same. According to Breen and Candlin (1980: 99), a well-informed teacher plays two main roles in the communicative classroom. First is the role of the teacher as a facilitator of the activities between all learners in the classroom as well as facilitator between the students and the activities and discourses. The second role of the teacher is of an “interdependent” member in the language learning. The teacher is expected to organise resources and also become a resource to control procedures and activities in the classroom. Though the communicative classrooms adopt a learner centred approach, Widdowson (1978), suggests that the teacher should not become less authoritative. The teacher still needs to organise, observe and control activities in the classroom.

Richards and Rogers (1986) suggest another set of roles for the teachers in a communicative setting. According to Richards and Rogers, a teacher is required to be a needs analyst, counsellor, and group activity manager. Knowing learners’ language need is very important for the teacher in a communicative classroom. The teacher needs to do the needs analysis formally or informally. Bax (2003) suggests the use of “context approach”, in which teacher first conducts a needs analysis and then identifies suitable methods of language teaching based on the need of the students. As a counsellor, the teachers need to give examples of effective communication. The teachers’ role as group process manager requires the teacher to manage the classroom as a setting for communication.

Role of the learners

As the interactionist theory emphasizes on the importance of comprehensible input which is got through negotiation of meaning, one of the major roles of the learners in a communicative classroom is that of a negotiator. Breen and Candlin (1980) suggest that the learners are supposed to negotiate for meaning between themselves in their own ways to achieve the ultimate goal of communicative competence. The learners play the role of a negotiator between themselves and the learning objectives. The more proficient students of the classroom may act as monitors for other learners by providing them feedback. Hence, they also have the role of a potential teacher in the classroom. Another role of a learner in communicative classroom can be of an informant to the teacher regarding their own learning improvement. In a communicative language classroom the teacher and the learners are mutually dependent participants in the teaching learning process. In communicative tasks students are expected to work in pairs or in small groups. Ohta’s study (2001) has proven the effectiveness of group activity in language classroom as it encourages the learners to use the target language more for various functions, such as, asking questions, making requests, and providing feedback. Therefore, cooperation is highly expected from the learners in communicative classroom.

Implications for Syllabus

According to Johnson (1982), a syllabus that links structures to meaning categories is defined as a communicative syllabus. Harmer (1982), on the other hand, argues that activities in the syllabus and the methodology make a syllabus communicative rather than the syllabus or its contents. Melrose (1991) opines that a communicative syllabus is negotiable and grants maximum autonomy to the learners. It does not follow a strict pattern and allows modifications as per the need of the learning condition. Yalden (1983) lists several types of communicative syllabus based on their components. Those are: Structural-Functional, Variable focus syllabus, Functional syllabus, Fully Notional syllabus, Fully communicative syllabus. Out of these syllabi fully notional syllabus is the strongest input syllabus and fully communicative syllabus is the one which was mentioned by Melrose that requires the least amount of instruction.

Functional syllabus is designed around the functions the learners would require to perform in the target language, such as introducing someone, asking for permission, expressing likes and dislikes, extending apologies, explaining things etc. Grammar elements are selected as per the functions being taught. This syllabus is suitable for teaching speaking and listening skills.

Nunan (1989), Long and Crookes (1992) advocate for the use of tasks that provide real world communicative challenges and opportunities. For this reason they suggest an analytic syllabus that adopts task-base language teaching (TBLT) method. They argue that the tasks provide learners appropriate language samples and opportunity to produce their own comprehensible language output. Nunan argues that the real world tasks help stimulating internal learning process.

According to Yalden (1983), ten important components of any communicative syllabus are

- i. The purposes to learn the language
- ii. The setting of language use
- iii. The role of the learner in the language performance.
- iv. Occasions of communication
- v. The functions of communication involved in those occasions.
- vi. The notions associated with those events
- vii. Required discourse skills
- viii. The desired variety of the target language and the level
- ix. Necessary grammatical component
- x. Necessary lexical content

Munby (1978) also prescribes some requirements of communicative syllabus which are very similar to the characteristics mentioned by Yalden. Munby mentions purpose, setting, event, interaction, target level, instrumentality, dialect, and communicative key as the components to be taken into consideration while designing a communicative syllabus.

Van Ek and Alexander (1980) argued that rather than simply specifying the grammar and vocabulary learners needed to master, a syllabus should focus on various aspects of language use such as: purposes, setting in which they will want to use the target language, role the learners, communicative events, language functions, notions, discourse and rhetorical skills, lexical content, grammatical content in order to be able to develop the learner's communicative competence.

Implications for Teaching Materials

Varieties of materials have been used in communicative approaches to language teaching. Communicative Language Teaching Practitioners view materials as a tool to influence the quality of classroom interaction and language use. Materials in CLT have the primary role of promoting communicative language use. The materials in a CLT are decided on the basis of the approach it adopts for teaching. As per Richards (2006) there are two different approaches to CLT; Process based approach and product based approach. The process based approach emphasizes on creating classroom processes that best facilitated language learning where as in product based approach the product or the desired skills a learner needs to master works as a starting point in course designing.

A) Process-Based Approach

In this approach it is believed that communication skill is a result of the classroom processes such as; classroom learner interaction, negotiation of meaning, collaboration for meaningful interaction, paying attention to input, learning from feedback, and trying new ways to say things, etc.. There are two types of instructions used in this approach namely Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Task-Based Instruction (TBI). The materials used in these instructions are different as one uses content or subject matter as a reference material for the teaching and the other includes various tasks as the material to be used to teach language skills to the students. Thus these two instruction methods prescribe different units as contents of the material. A detailed discussion is presented below.

The advocates of CBI state that the best way to make the classroom instruction a process to achieve communicative competence by using the content as the driving force of classroom activities and include other linguistic competencies like grammatical competence into the content. Richards states that CBI can be used as a framework for a unit of works for example- a unit of a business communication course can be based on sales and marketing. The teacher may identify the key topics and issues in the field in collaboration with a sales and marketing specialist. A variety of lessons can be framed for communication practice focusing on different skills developed out of the theme. Further Richards (2006) mentions CBI can be used as the guiding principle of an entire course. The topics of such course books are chosen such a way that they provide a framework to practice vocabulary, grammar and language skills in parallel. An example of such content is the first year English course in one European University which includes topics like; Drugs, Religious persuasion, Advertising, Immigration, AIDS, Native Americans, Nuclear Energy, etc. Hence, it is learnt here that the material of instruction in CBI emphasizes the topics to be included. The instruction is based on the content. The various skills of language are taught through these contents. The contents are decided on the basis of the needs of the program and the needs of the learners. The contents are basically topics which are used to build other communicative competencies.

TBI is based on the theory of learning that language is best learned from meaningful interaction using the language not from controlled practice. TBI is based on the tenet that grammar and other units of communicative competency can be developed as by-product of interactive tasks. TBI sees tasks as the primary unit to be used in the classroom for creating interactive atmosphere. Hence, the materials for this approach are various tasks which help learners practice language use in various contexts.

The tasks are then divided into two types; pedagogical and real-world. The pedagogical tasks are the tasks which are used in the classroom to improve different language skills but those tasks are such that anyone hardly encounters one in real life. On the other hand the real world tasks are the tasks that present a real life situation for communication. One is likely to face such situations in real life. It seems like a rehearsal of a real-world task.

B) Product-Based Approach

In this approach the product is the starting point of designing a course. The course is designed by identifying the kinds of uses of language the learner is expected to master at the end of instruction. Teaching materials are decided after words. This approach adopts two instructional methods; Text-based instruction and Competency based instruction. The text based instruction is similar to CBI in process approach. The difference lies in the focus of the instruction; process or product. Competency based instructions are apt for vocational courses.

Text-based instruction emphasizes on improving communicative competence by mastering different types of texts. Texts here mean a structured series of language that are used in special contexts in special way. The texts are related to conversation or language output in different contexts one may encounter throughout the day. Such syllabus also includes some grammar, vocabulary, topics and functions that are to be integrated to the mastery of the texts rather than being taught in isolation. An example of such content is the syllabus for *Certificates in Spoken and Written English*, which is taught in Australia. The contents of the instruction are as follows.

Exchanges -Simple exchanges relating to information and goods and services, Complex or problematic exchanges, Casual conversation

Forms-Simple formatted texts, Complex formatted texts

Procedures-Instructions, Procedures, Protocols

Information texts-Descriptions, Explanations, Reports, Directives, Texts which combine one or more of these text types

Story texts-Recounts, Narratives

Persuasive texts-Opinion texts, Expositions, Discussions

(Richards,2006)

Competency-based instruction is an approach that seeks to teach the students the basic skills they require to handle situations they normally encounter in real life. The focus on the outcomes of learning works as the driving force of teaching and curriculum design in this approach. This approach shifts the focus from the methodology to the outcome. In other words it can be said that in this approach, the classroom methodology is overlooked as far as it delivers the learning outcomes.

Classroom Activities

Activities play a vital role in CLT classes as they provide the opportunity to the learners to participate in meaningful interactions in various contexts. Communicative competence is improved through classroom activities in which students need to negotiate meaning, experiment their language hypotheses, correct misunderstandings, and work to eradicate communication failures (Ibid, 2006). Hence, the activities for a class need to be designed by keeping the requirements of the curriculum under consideration. There are various activity types suggested which can be used in a CLT classroom with little modification as per the requirement of the context.

(A) Role play

Role play refers to a communicative activity in which the students get experiential learning by performing roles in a pre-determined scenario that facilitates practice of aimed skills (Kiger, 2004). Hedge (2000) prefers role play in pairs or groups as a suitable activity for communicative classroom as it encourages the participation of all students. Role play is an activity that encourages active learning and allows students to gain new experience (Van Ments, 1999). Bell (2001) states that students' high level engagement in active learning is more effective than passive learning.

(B) Information gap

Information gap is an activity where learners need to find the missing information by communicating to each other in order to accomplish a task and this activity involves comprehension of information (Hedge, 2000). The rationale of this activity is the fact that, people normally initiate communication to get information they don't have (Richards, 2006). This activity provides more opportunity for learners to experience real life communication through practicing language beyond forms, and apply their linguistic ability to gain information. Thus, the learners will have to recall their existing knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and use their communication strategies and negotiation ability to complete a task.

(C) Games

There have been a large number of games used in CLT: spelling bees, crossword puzzles, limericks, Scrabble, riddles, Diplomacy, Guggenheim, tongue twisters, anagrams, Password, word squares, one-ups-manship, spoonerisms, rebuses, stinky pinkies, twenty questions, and debates to name a few (Palmer and Rodgers, 1983: 2). Terrell (1982) states that the primary goal of using games in language teaching is to make the learners use the language to achieve the goals of the game rather than considering the game to be the goal itself.

(D) Pair-work or group work

The best way to involve learners of the language classroom in as much interaction as possible is by assigning them with communicative activities in pairs or small groups. Storch's (2002) investigation on the nature of pair work interaction in ESL classrooms shows that pair interaction helps boosting the learning opportunities for language learners as participation is maximum in the social interaction. Block (1996) considers a language classroom to be a social event where communications between individuals result in various academic outcomes. Long & Porter (1985) suggest that pairing of mixed proficiency learners boosts negotiations in the target language and it benefits both high and low proficiency learners.

(E) Accuracy versus Fluency Activities

As one of the primary goals of CLT is to improve fluency, the classroom activities should be designed to enable fluency of the learners. Fluency refers to natural language use in meaningful interaction and maintaining comprehensible communication despite limitations. Fluency is developed when learners negotiate meaning, use communication strategies to avoid communication breakdowns, correct misunderstandings. Accuracy tasks on the other hand focus on the production of correct language responses in order to maintain accuracy. Accuracy activities generally focus on the formation of correct examples of language use, do not practice language in context, practice small samples of language, controlled use of language and do not require meaningful communication. A combination of fluency and accuracy activities will be helpful in helping the students learn correct forms as well as improve fluency in CLT classrooms.

Communicative Language Testing

Nunan (2009) emphasized that the correlation between teaching and learning is one of the fundamental principles of the curriculum design. In this light he has argued in favour of communicative language testing to achieve the desired outcomes in CLT. Communicative language testing measures the students' capability to perform in the target language in context-specific tasks. It takes into consideration various aspects of language competence by the learner, like the learners' knowledge of the language, their use of the language and the extent to which they apply the acquired knowledge in the communicative situations (Bakhsh, 2016; Miyata-Boddy & Langham, 2000; Gopal, 2014; Baseer & Alvi, 2014; Enache, 2005; Harding, 2014; Razmjoo, 2011; S. K. Kitao & K. Kitao, 1996). Davies (1988) argued communicative tests to be integrative, direct, and criterion referenced. Communicative tests are generally designed on the basis of communicative competence, covering the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Canale and Swain (1980) conceptualise communicative competence as a combination of linguistic competence (knowledge of linguistic forms), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to use language appropriately in contexts), strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies), and discourse competence (coherence and cohesion) (p. 4).

A group of researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) defined four principles of communicative test design on the basis of the model of communicative competence (Bailey, 1998). The first principle is "start from somewhere". Katsumasa (1997) and Wesche (1983) are in agreement with the principle by stating that the test makers should clearly state what they want to test while designing a test. Then only the scale and criteria in assessment should be established. Bailey (1998) clarifies this by stating that it is unfair if the test makers include some unstated objectives while grading a test which then risks the validity of the test. The second principle states that the content should match the needs of the language use by the learners. Carroll (1983) mentions in this context that the tasks set in the tests are guided by the tasks the learners are expected to perform in future. The third principle, as stated by OISE is the "bias for best". This means that the texts should be designed to elicit the best response from the learners. Brown (2003) and Bailey (1998) also favour this principle in language testing. According to Swain (1984), in order to make the assessment procedure biased for the best, the test makers should provide appropriate input and strategy to the students to help them prepare well for the test and the tests should be constructed wisely, taking into consideration the difficulty level for the best and the weaker learners as well. The fourth principle is "working on washback". The principle says, there should be clear scoring criteria for any test which should be provided both to the teachers and the learners too. The course objectives and the test contents are also crucial for positive washback.

Brown (2005) has also pointed out five requirements of communicative language tests. Brown lists characteristics like, having meaningful communication, authentic situation, comprehensible language input, creative language output and integrated language skills etc. to be considered in order to call a test communicative test.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the teaching methodology adopted for CLT best suits the purpose of improving the communicative skill of the learners, especially the second language learners. As the second language learners rarely get proper environment to practice English language communication skills, CLT helps them provide communicative atmosphere inside the classroom by involving them in real communicative tasks. The students learn various communicative strategies by participating in the interaction during the tasks. CLT makes the students responsible for their own learning by providing them the opportunities to practice their communicative skills through various activities. The communicative syllabus also plays a vital role in the contribution of CLT to the learner's communicative skills. The CLT syllabus differs from other conventional language syllabi as it does not prescribe only texts and grammar components. Rather it prescribes contents on the basis of the communicative requirements of the learners. This proves to be beneficial for the second language learners as they learn the language for various purposes and they need to perform different functions in the target language. The communicative language testing focuses on assessing the communicative capabilities of the learners and hence, it pushes the learners to focus on learning communicative skills during the classroom activities.

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