

SOME KEY ISSUES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

There is an extensive literature on **Communicative Language Teaching** and the important role played by the use of “authentic” rather than scripted language.

What became known, if not so widely understood, as the “communicative” approach to language teaching was developed and introduced at the beginning of the 1970s mainly by British and American academics. It was disseminated and developed further from the mid-1970s onwards by the Council of Europe¹ which has been at the forefront of contemporary thinking and practice on language teaching and learning. The most widely known (if not read) manifestation of this has undoubtedly been the Common European Framework of Reference, first launched in 1997 (Council of Europe, 2001). Although the Framework, as it is commonly known, claims to prescribe no one methodological approach, but to be merely descriptive, it is at least arguable that it is underpinned by some of the key elements of the communicative approach.

As the name implies the main purpose of CLT is to facilitate the development of the learner’s functional communicative competence, in contrast for example with earlier - some would say more traditional approaches - such as “**grammar/translation**” the aim of which was to acquire an understanding of forms of the language. This debate - or pendulum swing - between on the one hand acquiring language for use (communication) and on the other learning about the forms of language as an end in itself (grammar) is one that continues to impact on thinking about language learning and teaching.

CLT is also often contrasted with the **audiolingual** approach to language learning which was prevalent in the 1960s, based on the earlier behaviourist learning theories of BF Skinner (“operant conditioning”).² Although both had the objective of developing functional competence those objectives were pursued in quite different ways. The basis of the audio lingual method was drilling and memorisation based on repetition of prepared structures and phrases; this approach lent itself also to some of the earliest computer mediated language programmes (CALL) and their “drill and kill” activities.³ Communicative Language Teaching on the other hand views language learning as a social activity, emphasising the social roles of both speaker and listener. It is learner-centred, based on an identification of learner needs, and in order to promote the functionality of language use over its form, its methodology is centred around the learner’s involvement in meaningful interaction with language (the “meanings that matter”). So the learner would typically be placed in communicative situations (although often simulated for the classroom context) where there was a need to communicate, and where more creative and less formal language tasks were the norm. Rather than rote learning of dialogues or pattern drilling, the emphasis was on games, problem solving tasks (especially “information gap” activities) and unscripted role-plays.

One of the most common misconceptions about CLT is that it does not include any formal teaching about language (grammar). Some have argued with considerable persuasiveness that this arises because while the linguistic content of a communicative syllabus was based on a clear and well-researched theory of language, there was no corresponding learning principle to guide teaching and learning, other than the rather imprecise idea of “learning through doing”

¹ J.A. van Ek (1975) *The Threshold Level*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe; Council of Europe (1988). *Learning and teaching modern languages for communication* - Final Report of the Project Group. Strasbourg.

J.A. van Ek, J.L.M. Trim (1991) *Threshold Level 1990*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe; and for an overview see - J.L.M Trim (2007) *Modern Languages in the Council of Europe 1954-1997*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe

² B.F. Skinner (1957) *Verbal Behaviour*, New York. N/ Chomsky (1959) ‘A review of B.F. Skinner’s “Verbal Behaviour”’. *Language* 35, 1: 26-58

³ e.g. L. King (2014) “Where Is Comenius? Reflections on Language Learning and Technology”, APAC Journal no. 79

The conception underlying learning within CLT was confined to the widespread assumption that the learners' communicative competence develops automatically through their active participation in meaningful communicative tasks. (Zoltan Dörnyei)⁴

To an extent this uncertainty has led to a wide range of interpretations of how to teach communicatively.

There is no single text or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative. (Richard and Rogers)⁵

Approaches have ranged from an uncompromising rejection of grammar, epitomised by Krashen's (1985) *Input Hypothesis*, to far more structured approaches.⁶ Indeed some of the founders of CLT emphasised the importance of a structured linguistic component:

One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view." (Littlewood)⁷

In the subsequent Council of Europe guidelines it is also quite explicitly not the case that communicative means grammar - free. . Much attention has been paid to the development of a "communicative" or functional grammar and of approaches which combine both the implicit (internalisation of language) and explicit (reflection on and understanding of structure)⁸. The point is, however, that perhaps because of the theoretical confusion, there remains a view, including among teacher trainers, that communicative language teaching is opposed to grammar.

⁴ Z. Dörnyei (2009) "Communicative language teaching in the 21st century: The principled communicative approach" *Perspectives*, 2009, Vol XXXVI n.2

⁵ J.C. Richards, T>S> Rodgers (2001) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (2nd edn)* CUP p. 155

⁶ S.D. Krashen (1985) *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London Longman R. Johnstone, (1989) *Communicative Interaction: a guide for language teachers* London CILTE. Hawkins (1996) "Introduction: language teaching in perspective", introduction to Hawkins ed. *30 Years of language teaching* . London *CILT*

⁷ W. Littlewood (1981) *Communicative Language Teaching An introduction* CUP

⁸ There is a very readable overview of this issue in L.King, P. Boaks (1994) *Grammar!: A Conference Report* including articles by Richard Johnstone, Eric Hawkins and Brian Page.

Intercultural Competence

There is an intrinsic link between **Communicative Language Teaching** and **Cultural awareness**, and also **Intercultural Competence** which are related but far from identical concepts. Cultural awareness is a concept which became popular in education in the 80s and 90s, especially in the anglophone world. Although it has a wider application than in the languages classroom it has been linked especially with language learning, and with the communicative approach, based on an assumption that there must be something about which to communicate (a meaning that matters). Of course culture has always been part of language education - in earlier times confined to works of literature, but in the 70s and 80s attempts were made to broaden the concept beyond literature and to develop in learners a more explicit appreciation of "the other", which was seen also as a way of reinforcing a sense of self identity.⁹

There are many unresolved issues about cultural awareness, or cultural education, among them its relationship with language learning and specifically with language awareness. "In what sense is language awareness a part of cultural awareness?"¹⁰ More recently a preferred - and probably more researched - concept has been that of intercultural competence. Associated in particular with the work of Mike Byram and The Council of Europe, Intercultural Competence relates to and indeed complements the idea of communicative competence. It includes a skills component - referencing the "savoirs" of the Common European Framework¹¹, but adding a fifth savoir - that of 'savoir s'engager, including political education and critical cultural awareness¹²

A number of frameworks have been developed for understanding and assessing intercultural competencies and this concept has had considerable influence on curriculum developers, not least in the English speaking world where the rationale for language learning needs to be more than that of the acquisition of a skill.

⁹ M. Byram (1989) *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education* Multilingual Matters

¹⁰ Routledge Encyclopaedia of Language Teaching and Learning p. 182

¹¹ CEFR 101-107 Savoir (declarative knowledge including knowledge of the world and intercultural awareness) ,savoir-faire (skills and know-how) , savoir-être (existential competence including attitudes to other cultures) and savour-apprendre (ability to learn)

¹² M. Byram (1997) (*Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Multilingual Matters p.34

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