

## Key Elements in Conducting Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

### ELÉMENTS CLÉS DE L'INTRODUCTION DE L'APPROCHE COMMUNICATIVE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT LINGUISTIQUE

MA Qinghong<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In conducting communicative approach in ELT classroom, some key elements should be taken into consideration: syllabus design; the relation between the teacher and learner, accuracy and fluency, learning and acquisition; teaching and learning activities in CLT including communicative tasks, materials employed in teaching, usual classroom activities, and typical communicative activities under this approach. With all these considered, can CLT be possibly carried on in ELT classroom fully and efficiently.

**Key words:** Communicative language teaching; Syllabus design; Classroom activities

**Résumé:** Dans l'introduction de l'approche communicative dans l'enseignement de la langue anglaise, quelques éléments clés devraient être pris en considération: programme des cours; relations entre professeurs et étudiants, exactitude et facilité, enseignement et acquisition; activités d'enseignement et d'apprentissage dans l'enseignement communicatif, y compris travail communicatif, matériels employés dans l'enseignement, activités habituelles en classe et activités communicatives typiques sous cette approche. Une fois que tous ces éléments sont pris en considération, l'approche communicative de l'enseignement de langue pourrait être entièrement et efficacement poursuivie dans l'enseignement de langue anglaise.

**Mots-Clés:** L'enseignement communicatif de langue; Programmes des cours; Activités en classe

Language teachers have worked out various kinds of methods to take communicative approach into their classrooms. Yet problems arise whether some of the ways they have employed are proper or not for this approach. In this paper some key elements are presented about this approach including syllabus design; how to keep the proper relation between the teacher and learner, accuracy and fluency, learning and

---

<sup>1</sup> Address: School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Economic University, Jinan, 250014, China.

E-mail: helenmqh@163.com

\*Received 14 December 2008; accepted 3 January 2009

acquisition; teaching and learning activities in CLT including communicative tasks, materials employed in teaching, usual classroom activities, and typical communicative activities under this approach.

## 1. SYLLABUS DESIGN

Discussions of the nature of the syllabus have been central in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in earlier days. One of the first syllabus models was described as notional syllabus by D.A Wilkins (1976). The syllabus specified the semantic-grammatical categories and the categories of communicative function that learners need to express. The council of Europe expanded and developed this into a syllabus which was published as “Threshold Level English” (Van EK and Alexander 1980), and it specified what was needed in order to be able to achieve a reasonable degree of communicative proficiency in a foreign language, including the language items needed to realize this “threshold level”.

There are at present several proposals and models for what a syllabus might be in CLT, Yalden (1983) describes the major current communicative syllabus types which were summarized by J.C. Richards and T.S. Rodgers (1986) with reference sources to each model:

<i>Type</i>	<i>Reference</i>
1. Structures plus functions	Wilkins (1976)
2. Functional spiral around a structure core	Brumfit (1980)
3. Structural,functional,instrumental	Allen (1980)
4. Functional	Jupp and Hodlin (1975)
5. Notional	Wilkins (1979)
6. Interactional	Widdowson (1979)
7. Task-based	Prabhu (1983)
8. Learner generated	Candlin (1976)
	Henner-Stanchina and Riley (1978 )

All the syllabuses in the list concentrated upon language use and appropriateness rather than simply on language form, though they have differences in other aspects.

## 2. THE FUNCTIONAL/NOTIONAL SYLLABUS

The Functional-Notional Approach, which can be seen as one version of the communicative school, proposes the idea that language should be classified in terms of what people wanted to do with it-functions-or in terms of what meanings people wanted to put across-notions-rather than in terms of grammatical items. Further, the language was to be categorized by level, starting with the basic level, which would permit the learner to survive when visiting the country in which the language was spoken. For English, this work was done by Jan Van EK, who, in 1975, produced “The Threshold Level ” the basic syllabus that would serve as a foundation upon which to build more sophisticated speech capacities as the learner progresses. In the handbook, Van EK gave a list of six basic functions:

1<sup>st</sup> Imparting and seeking factual information---identifying, reporting —including describing and narrating, correcting, asking.

2<sup>nd</sup> Expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes---- expressing agreement and disagreement

- inquiring about agreement or disagreement
- denying something, accepting an offer or invitation
- declining an offer or invitation
- inquiring whether offer or invitation is accepted or declined
- offering to do something
- etc.

3<sup>rd</sup> Expressing and finding out emotional attitudes

- expressing and inquiring about pleasure, liking
- expressing an inquiring about displeasure, dislike
- expressing and inquiring about surprise, home, satisfaction, dissatisfaction
- expressing and inquiring about intention
- expressing and inquiring about want and desire
- etc.

4<sup>th</sup> Expressing and finding out moral attitudes

- apologizing
- expressing appreciation
- etc.

5<sup>th</sup> Getting things done

- suggesting a course of action
- requesting, inviting, or advising others to do something
- warning others to take care or to refrain from doing something
- instructing or directing others to do something

6<sup>th</sup> Socializing

- to greet people
- when meeting people
- when introducing people and being introduced
- etc.

Within any functional category, there will be a number of different realizations. Thus, for example, a request could take the following forms:

Please open the window.

Open the window, please.

Would you open the window?

Would you mind opening the window?

I wonder if you would mind opening the window.

It might be a good idea to open the window.

Each form will be appropriate to a specific role within a specific situation. Van EK added to his list of functions a set of criteria for the specification of situations:

1<sup>st</sup> Social roles—stranger/stranger, friend/friend, private person/official person, patient/doctor, etc

2<sup>nd</sup> Psychological roles—neutrality, equality, sympathy, antipathy

3<sup>rd</sup> Setting—

A. Geographical location (foreign country where the TL is the native language, foreign country where the TL is not the native language, own country)

B. Place a) outdoors (park, street, seaside)

b) indoors; private life (house, apartment, room, kitchen)

Surroundings—family, friends, acquaintances, strangers...

Van EK also added a grammatical component, and a set of topics. All of these are to be set within the spiral curriculum, in typical communicative fashion. (The Threshold Level 1975)

### 3. RELATIONS CONCERNED

#### 3.1 Teacher and Learner

The roles of the teacher and learner are quite different from those in traditional teaching methods. In the traditional classroom, the teacher is in charge and “controls” the learning. In CLT the teacher serves as more of a facilitator (Larsen-Freeman, 1986), allowing students to be in charge of their own learning. The teacher sets up the exercise, and gives direction to the class. But because the students’ performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as referee or monitor.

**Table 1. Methods and Teacher and Learners Roles**

Method	Teacher Roles	Learner Roles
Audio-lingualism	Language modeler Drill leader	Pattern practicer Accuracy enthusiast
Situational language teaching	Context setter Error corrector	Imitator memorizer
Communicative language teaching	Needs analyst Task designer	Improviser negotiator
Total physical response	Commander Action monitor	Order taker Performer
Community language learning	Counselor paraphraser	Collaborator Whole person
The natural approach	Actor Props user	Guesser Immerser
Suggestopedia	Auto-hypnotist Authority figure	Relaxer True-believer

A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, however. The learners do much more

speaking than in a traditional classroom, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, learners may find that they gain confidence in using the target language in general. They are more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The whole process of the class is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. The emphasis on communicative process, rather than mastery of language form, results in different roles for the teacher and the learner from those found in the other methods. Table 1 is a synoptic view of the roles defined for teachers and learners within various approaches.

As suggested in the chart, some schools of methodology see the teacher as an ideal language model and commander of classroom activity (e.g., Audio-lingual Method, Natural Approach, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response), whereas others see the teacher as background facilitator and classroom colleague to the learners (e.g., Communicative Language Teaching, Community Language Learning).

Breen and Candlin described teacher's role in CLT in the following terms, "The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. The latter role is closely related to the objectives of the first role and arises from it." (Breen, M. and C.N. Candlin 1980)

So, in CLT the teacher:

1<sup>st</sup> Plans the lessons according to the learner's needs.

2<sup>nd</sup> Advises and guides learner in the communication process.

3<sup>rd</sup> Organizes the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities.

As Littlewood (1981) states, "During the activities, the teacher acts as an advisor, answering student's questions and monitoring their performance. At other time he might be a 'co-communicator'—engaging in the communicative activity along with the students."

Breen and Candlin (1980) describe the learner's role within CLT in the following terms, "The role of learner as negotiator-between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning-emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way."

### **3.2 Accuracy and Fluency**

There are commonly two different demands for language teaching: one is that students' language forms (pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, syntax, function and style etc.) must be correct, appropriate (i.e. accuracy); the other is that students are able to use the foreign language as naturally and fluently as they do with their mother tongue. (i.e. fluency) For the two aspects, although applied linguists (Littlewood 1981; Widdowson 1978, etc.) use different terms to discuss them, they all point out that language teachers should properly deal with the relations between the demands. Brumfit (1979) deals with the fluency/accuracy polarity in detail. He suggests that:

"...the demand to produce work for display to the teacher in order that evaluation and feedback could be supplied conflicted directly with the demand to perform adequately in the kind of natural circumstances for which teaching was presumably a preparation. Language display for evaluation tended to lead to concern for accuracy, monitoring, reference rules, possibly explicit knowledge, problem solving and evidence of skill-getting. In contrast, language use requires fluency, expression rules, a reliance on implicit knowledge and automatic performance. It will on occasion also require monitoring and problem-solving strategies, but these will not be the most prominent features, as they tend to be in the conventional model where the student produces, the teacher corrects, and the student tries again." (Brumfit 1979)

In his book, Brumfit makes the point that accuracy and fluency are not opposites, but are complementary: however materials and activities are often devised as if they were in conflict, and

teachers certainly adjust their behaviour in the light of what is important to them at any particular point.

The accuracy/fluency distinction is important to language teachers. Theoretically speaking, none of the teachers would say he only asks for accuracy not fluency, and vice versa. But in actual teaching, traditional methods pay more attention to correctness, while CLT shifts the stress to fluency.

### **3.3 Learning and Acquisition**

More recent investigations of how people become language users have centered on the distinction between acquisition and learning. In particular Stephen Krashen (1976, 1981, 1985) characterized the former as a subconscious process which results in the knowledge of a language whereas the latter results only in 'knowing about' the language. Acquiring a language is more successful and longer lasting than learning.

The suggestion Krashen made is that second (or foreign) language learning needs to be more like the child's acquisition of its native language. Although there may be some limits on the language that children hear (see below), they are never consciously 'taught it', nor do they consciously set out to learn it. Instead they hear and experience a considerable amount of the language in situations where they are involved in communicating with an adult --- usually a parent. Their gradual ability to use language is the result of many subconscious processes. They have not consciously set out to learn a language: it happens as a result of the input they receive and the experiences which accompany this input. Traditional foreign language teaching, on the other hand, seems to concentrate on getting the adult student to consciously learn items of language in isolation – the exact opposite of this process.

Just as Stern (1992) points out, although we don't accept Krashen's theory of conscious learning cannot come into subconscious acquisition, we may take the view as: the opportunity of subconsciously absorbing a language surely exists; while the language which the learner can consciously deal with and which is strictly controlled is unlikely to offer the opportunity of absorbing the language subconsciously. Communicative activities offered by CLT encourage subconscious language acquisition in the sense that in the course of communicating, people mainly focus their attention on language meaning not language form. Language learning in language use is sure to be mainly subconscious. Hence it is another important aspect for CLT to deal with the relation between learning and acquisition properly.

## **4. TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN CLT**

### **4.1 Communicative Task**

Language teachers are constantly looking for language learning activities and materials that will help their students communicate with speakers of the target language. These activities require the students to complete a communicative task.

According to David Nunan (1993), a communicative task is “ a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language whole their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.”

The starting point for task design should be the goal and objectives which are set out in syllabus or curriculum guidelines which underpin in the teaching program. The next step is selecting or creating input for students to work with. The use of authentic input is the central characteristic of communicative tasks. Where possible, it is desirable to build up a “bank” of data. Text, audio or video recording can be classified and filed under topics and themes (e.g. work/jobs; holidays; future plans; etc.), and provide a ready-made resource to be drawn on when designing tasks.

Nunan contends that one should work from the data to the teaching/learning objectives, rather than the other way round-i.e. it is better to derive communicative activities and other exercises such as

grammatical manipulation exercises, from input, rather than say, deciding to teach a particular item, and then creating a text to exemplify the target feature or item.

## **4.2 Materials**

A wide variety of materials have been used to support CLT. Practitioners of CLT view materials as a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use. Materials thus have the primary role of promoting communicative language use. Richard J.C. and Rodgers T.S. (1986) summarized three kinds of materials currently used in CLT.

### **4.2.1 Text-based materials**

A typical lesson consists of a theme (e.g. relaying information), a task analysis, for thematic development (e.g. understanding the message, asking questions to obtain clarification, asking for more information, taking notes, ordering and presenting information), a practice situation description (e.g. “A caller asks to see your manager. He does not have an appointment. Gather the necessary information from him and relay the message to your manager.”), a stimulus presentation (in the preceding case, the beginning of an office conversation scripted and on tape), comprehension questions (e.g. “Why is the caller in the office?”), and paraphrase exercises.

### **4.2.2 Task-based materials**

A variety of games, role plays, simulations, and task-based communication activities have been prepared to support CLT classes. These typically are in the form of one-of-a-kind items; exercise handbooks, cue cards, pair-communication practice materials. There are typically two sets of material for a pair of students, each set containing different kinds of information. Sometimes the information is complementary, and partners must fit their respective parts of the “jigsaw” into a composite whole. Other assumes different role relationships for the partners (e.g. an interviewer and an interviewee). Still others provide drills and practice materials with interactional formats.

### **4.2.3 Authentic Materials**

These might include language-based “from-life” materials or graphic and visual sources around which communicative activities can be built, such as magazines, newspapers, advertisements, maps, pictures, symbols, graphs, and charts. Different kinds of objects can be used to support communicative exercises.

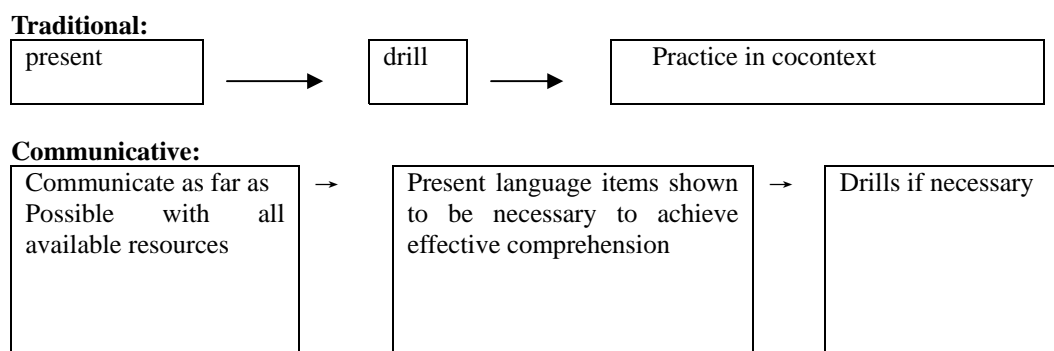
## **4.3 Classroom Activities**

### **4.3.1 Procedures of Introducing New Language**

Communicative principles can be applied to the teaching of any skill, at any level, so a fixed description of typical classroom procedures based on communicative language teaching is not feasible.

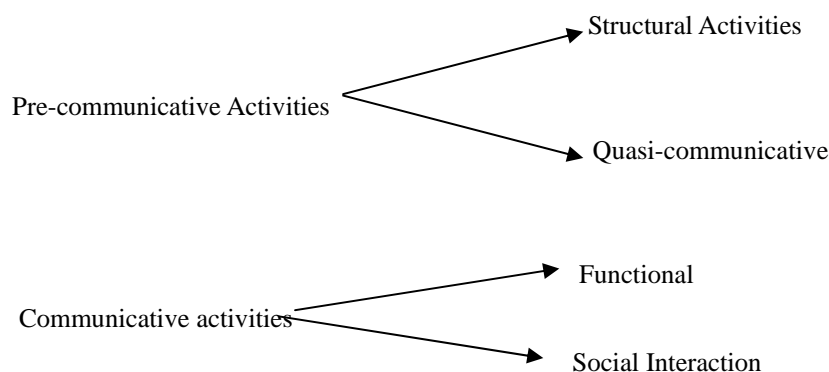
Compared with the grammar-translation method, the greatest real change as a result of the CLT will rest in the simple reversal of the procedures, as **Figure 2-2** illustrates:

Table 2



(Brumfit, 1980)

The view of Abbs and Freebrain is reflected in their textbook, “Starting Strategies”. In the textbook, teaching points are introduced in dialogue form, grammatical items are isolated for controlled practice, and then freer activities are provided. Pair and group work is suggested to encourage students to use and practice functions and forms. Littlewood (1981) similarly proposed his model of the methodological procedures as follows:



Pre-communicative activities aim to give the learners fluent control over linguistic forms, so that the lower-level process will be able to unfold automatically in response to higher-level decisions based on meanings. They focus on accuracy. Although the activities may emphasize the links between forms and meanings, the main criterion for success is whether the learner produces acceptable language.

Communicative activities aim at the communication of meaning. They focus on fluency. They pass from strictly guided tasks through semi-guided to free-communication tasks. In the activities, the production of linguistic forms becomes subordinate to higher-level decisions, related to the communication of meaning. The learner is thus expected to increase his skill in starting from an intended meaning, selecting suitable language forms from his total repertoire, and producing them fluently. The criterion for success is whether the meaning is conveyed effectively. They include functional communicative activities and social interaction activities.

The main purpose of functional communicative activities is that learners should use the language they know in order to get meaning across as effectively as possible. In the process of performing certain tasks students will: 1) share information, e.g. pair/group tasks: following directions; picture identification; discovering differences; discovering missing information; arranging pieces of information in sequences, communicating patterns and pictures, reconstructing story sequences, etc. 2) use information, e.g. group tasks: pooling information, solving problems.

The main purpose of social interaction activities is to give the learners and opportunity to use the language in an appropriate social context, to create variety of social situations and relationships, e.g. pair/group tasks: discussion, simulations and role-play.



### 4.3.2 Typical Communicative Activities

There are three typical communicative activities in CLT: group discussion, simulation and role-play.

Group discussion is that a couple of learners exchange ideas orally around a problem or situation. In order to get a successful session Jeremy Harmer (1991) gives some hints about organizing discussions:

- Put students in groups first. Before asking students to discuss as a whole class, put them in groups to try out the topic.
- Give students a chance to prepare. Where a more formal discussion is due to take place students need a chance to prepare their opinions.
- Give students a task. One way of promoting discussion is to give students a task as part of the discussion process.
- Discussion activities can be divided into three kinds: the buzz group, controversial topics and the debate.

The idea of a simulation is to create the pretence of a real-life situation in the classroom: students “stimulate” the real world. Thus the teacher might ask them to pretend that they are at an airport, or he might organize them to get together to plan an imaginary reunion. What the teacher is trying to do—artificially of course—is to give students practice in real-world English.

For a simulation to work it needs certain characteristics. There needs to be a ‘*reality of function*’ (students must accept the function; they must not think of themselves as language students but as the people in the simulation), a *simulated environment* (the students do not be taken to a real airport) and *structure* (there must be some structure to the simulation and essential facts must be provided).

Within these guidelines we can add another variable: sometimes the students take part as themselves (if they are asked to organize a party, for example, they are not being asked to pretend to be someone else) and sometimes the teacher asks them to play a role, pretending to be someone that they are not (they may be asked to be a distraught policeman or a bad-tempered child). In the latter case the activity is in the form of role-play. All role plays are simulations, in other words, but not all simulations are role plays.

After the simulation has finished the teacher will want to conduct feedback with the students. The object here is to discuss with them whether the activity was successful, why certain decisions were reached, etc. It is important for the teacher to conduct feedback about the content of an activity such as simulation as well as discussing the use of English. If only the latter is focused on, the students will perceive the object of the exercise as being concerned only with linguistic accuracy rather than the ability to communicate efficiently—which is the main motive for this kind of activity.

With the above aspects in language teachers’ mind, they can possibly design a language teaching class perfectly under communicative approach and conduct this approach effectively.

## REFERENCES

- Breen, M.P. and Candlin, C.N. (1980). The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 1.
- Brumfit, C.J. and Johnson, K. (eds.). (1979). *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1978). The monitor model for second-language acquisition. In R. Gringras (ed) *Second language acquisition and foreign language teaching*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Krashen, S. D.(1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: issues and implications*. Harlow: Longman.

- Larsen-Freeman, D.(2000). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Littlewood, W.(1981). *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1993). From learning-centeredness to learner-centeredness. *Applied Language learning*, 4.
- Richard, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. (1986). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1978). *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1990). *Aspects of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.