

The Teaching of Discussion and Debate at Tsuru University : The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

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Keywords: Discussion, debate, Communicative Language Teaching, Grammatical Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence, Discourse Competence, Strategic Competence, Practical expertise, MEXT, Current Affairs, Motivation and Independent Learning.

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to a continued exploration of what Communicative Language Teaching has to offer the language teacher and learner, especially in the teaching of Discussion and Debate at an English language teachers' program at Tsuru University. The paper explores the adoption of CLT in Japan; and examines the effectiveness of the method in an EFL context. The real *forte* of communicative language teaching lies in the fact that it is a versatile approach, which permits teachers to draw on its critical strengths without needing to adopt an all-or-nothing view of it or abandoning the structurally-inclined syllabuses that instructors may feel bound to. Even if grammatical competence alone is the goal of the learner, CLT is doubtless one

valuable means of achieving it. The problems that do exist with it – few of which are lethal – are in a sense diminished in light of this broad range of application it has, and the fact that it fills what was once a 'communicative vacuum' in pedagogy. While it may not provide the answer to all aspects of language teaching, its contribution nevertheless justifies its current prevalence.

1. Introduction: Communicative Language Teaching

Today, almost any language methodology reflects an awareness of the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). Paramount among these is the notion of language as communication and not merely mastery of linguistic structures, a realization that has fostered a more functional view of language, complementing but not superseding the structural view. What 'language as communication' competence has been described as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input,

- a. Grammatical Competence – Mastery of the structural properties of language (Chomsky's "competence");
- b. Sociolinguistic Competence – the understanding of social context and rules of appropriacy upon which successful communication is based;
- c. Discourse Competence – the interpretation of speech/text in terms of its relationship to the discourse as a whole and

according to inferencing pragmatics in communication.

skills based on an understanding for principles of coherence / cohesion; e. SLA research – particularly interlanguage studies⁽⁴⁾ and error analysis work⁽⁵⁾ – serve to de-emphasize accuracy (form) in the interests of fluency (meaning) and promote the “semantic and greater emphasis on the learner – the cause and consequence of a surge in affective research – promoted humanistic techniques such as the silent way, suggestopedia and community language learning which fed into the somewhat eclectic communicative approach.

- d. Strategic Competence – the ability to compensate for obstacles to performance and to initiate, maintain, repair and redirect communication.

Communicative competence theory has provided the main theoretical impetus for CLT by specifying the requirements for successful communication and implicitly prescribing a view of learning through communication that is authentic in the constraints (social, grammatical, discursual, and temporal) it places on the learner. Other factors, however, have also contributed to the ascent of functionalism:

a. Previous approaches to language teaching frequently left students unable to communicate, despite their control of the formal aspects of language.

b. The growing role of English in the international community fuelled demand for techniques equipping learners with the means to function in the language and participate usefully and directly in social, educational, commercial and political activities (a demand that spawned a simultaneous growth in ESP programmes).

c. Philosophical developments within Austin’s Speech Act Theory (ref. Searle’s ‘indirect speech acts’ and Grice’s ‘politeness principles’) emphasised the “performative” aspect of language and the importance of context, appropriacy and deep-structure meaning.

d. An increased focus on discourse analysis and such notions as shared knowledge, presupposition and inference, reaffirmed the role of context and

Communicative Language Teaching is the pedagogical realization of these various trends each of which is represented in the following general principles characterizing the approach:

- Language is a system for expressing meaning; its primary function is interaction and communication. Activities should reflect this by promoting communication at the discourse level, being authentic and task-based, and involving learners in the processes of information-sharing, the negotiation of meaning and interaction. Language for communication is thus necessarily achieved through communication in as naturalistic an environment and as early as possible, thereby replicating first language acquisition. need not be the case. ‘Language learning through communication’ is a necessary but likely not a sufficient condition for complete communicative competence; as such it is a notion compatible with the more realistic weak communicative approach that allows recognition of the fact that first and second language acquisition are not identical processes.

- Language is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and, provided the

speaker/writer is successfully conveying his message, errors – phonological or structural – are consequently de-emphasized. “choice” – to be creative with language and express their personalities and cultural identities.

- Teachers work to develop a communicative environment, analyze student needs, counsel students, and facilitate with tasks.

- The students' L1 is used judiciously, although, emphasis is on maximizing use of the L2.

- Objectives should reflect learner needs/interests and give learners the functional skills/knowledge to meet those needs. - All 4 skills are given prominence, but form is always subordinate to content and process. Integration of the skills is central, for in real communication they rarely function in isolation.

The activity types these precepts translate to include pre-communicative activities for communicative skills development, information-gap / problem-solving / chart- completion tasks, pair work and group work activities, games, role-plays, simulations, skits and drama, debates / discussions, improvisations, listening exercises and analysis of authentic video.

Finally, what constitutes the ‘communicative syllabus’ has been controversial. Many believe CLT to be a distinction between syllabus and methodology based on the idea that even a purely structural syllabus may be realized communicatively, for the syllabus itself is “an inert abstract object What learners do is not directly determined by the syllabus but is a consequence of how the syllabus is methodologically methodologies do tend to be bound to a particular type of

syllabus, CLT could be said to transcend this, and perhaps that constitutes the main warrant for its being termed an ‘approach’.

2. Communicative Language Teaching in Japan

In Japan, the practice of CLT and its explicit adoption by the policy makers is a fairly recent phenomenon even though the concept had been known by most language teachers for a very long time. Riley (12) provides a comprehensive history of the development of English Education policy in Japan and how Japan moved towards CLT. He maintains that English used to be taught in Japan as a classical language (e.g. Latin or Greek), “viewed as a source of valuable information and perceived as a one way channel for the reception of western thought, not a two-way channel transmitting Japanese ideas back ideologies have resulted in “a set of teaching priorities and procedures which over time have become stiff and inflexible, and which now create considerable resistance to the introduction of new purposes and methods”.

However, Riley (12) maintains that there have been many calls since the 1980s from within Japan for changes in the Japanese educational system in general, and in the teaching of English in particular. “English language teaching in Japan traditionally has been based on a teacher-centred approach with the term Yakudoku used to describe the particular grammar-translation method widely employed in Japanese schools”. As a result of the continued calls for

educational reform, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MOE) put into effect changes in the teaching of English in junior high schools in 1993 and the adding of a new high school subject, Oral Communication, consisting of courses in listening. Then in 2002, the newly named Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) produced a document entitled “Developing a strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English practical communication abilities’”. It lays out communicative attainment targets for school students, which range from an ability to hold ‘simple conversations’ at junior high school level, and an ability to hold ‘normal conversations’ at senior high school level, to graduates leaving university with an ability to effectively function in their chosen occupational field in English. These changes were aimed at promoting oral communication as the primary goal for English education. A term which has been commonly adopted for the new courses, and the new approach to English. There is an assumption inherent in the CLT method that the goal of students of ESL/EFL is the ability to communicate in English with a high proficiency. This simply is not true in most Outer and Expanding Circle contexts. In Japan, proficiency in English communication is just not necessary for daily life and survival in Japanese society (although, CLT has been adopted by MEXT and Japanese educators). More importantly, “the implementation of CLT has been challenging for Japanese English”^{(17),(18)}. The question then is what CLT offers the language teachers and learners.

3. What Communicative Language Teaching Offers the Language Teachers/Learners Authenticity

In attempting to create an authentic environment, CLT exposes learners to the realities of near-‘genuine’ communication, thereby familiarizing them with the nature of the constraints ‘real-world communication’ entails. This has a number of potential benefits:

(i) Students acquire for themselves a sense of direction in their learning; of what it is they are striving for and why. This has implications for motivation (below).

(ii) In learning to cope with linguistic and paralinguistic constraints of ‘the communicative situation’ (lack of vocabulary, ‘noise’, etc.), students naturally develop for themselves strategies for overcoming these. Skills integration, favoured by the communicative approach, serves as one such strategy whereby the exercise of one skill facilitates the operation and development of others. Affect – By giving them a functional grasp of language, CLT develops in learners a sense of confidence, an awareness of their ability to perform in real settings. This helps dispel the view of language learning as an academic activity providing them with knowledge utilizable only within formal, educational contexts. Further, as Littlewood notes, opportunities within CLT for communicative interaction help students “integrate the foreign language with their own personality and thus ... feel more emotionally. Secondly, motivation is bolstered and learning increased through content geared to learners’ needs/interests and the scope given for teacher and student creativity and expression. In

particular, the utilization of authentic materials/realia that are in themselves inherently interesting, spurs student interests, helps them relate their learning to the outside world and encourages them to see language as a means to an end. Lastly, elements of the approach serve to lessen student anxiety: (i) the humanistic nature of the than an omniscient figure, allows for a better classroom rapport. So too does the cooperative nature of student-student relationships that emerges from interactive activities; (ii) the focus on message and tolerance of errors is more conducive to risk-taking as is the fluid, dynamic nature of communicative tasks that do not demand flawless form, but support creativity, hypothesis-testing and the development of a capacity to maximize one's performance with whatever means one has available.

In light of Dulay, Burt and Krashen's claim that "attitudinal and motivational factors have more to do with the successful attainment of communicative skills in a second language than metalinguistic McKay notes context as being CLT's biggest challenge to worldwide adoption, as "teachers outside of the Inner Circle ... question the appropriateness of the approach for their particular teaching context".

4. Application to Discussion & Debate Course

Goals: not simply to improve general discussion and formal debating skills, but also to raise students' awareness of how to teach these skills.

Elementary, junior high, high

Group tasks might include making plans

for actual lessons that can be presented in class. In other words, get students to imagine themselves teaching actual classes in which the goal is to generate discussion among students. Given the age and maturity of our students, it might well be suitable for them to plan classes to be taught to elementary school students. Students might, for example, be directed to plan and collaboratively present an "all-English" class. This might have a grammatical focus or a topic focus.

Examples:

Work together to plan and present an "all-English" class for elementary school students. Your goal is to practice simple present and simple past tense while students are engaged in discussion. All the members of your group should participate equally in the discussion and presentation and you should be ready to answer questions about your presentation.

Work together to plan and present an "all-English" class for elementary students. Your goal is to discuss (or formally debate) which Japanese custom you would like people in other countries to copy. All the members of your group should participate equally in the discussion and you should be ready to answer questions about your discussion.

Broadly communicative, content-based methodology

The overriding goal is to get students to use English in a meaningful way, even though one focus of the discussion activity may be grammatical. In this regard, not only authentic text, but also musical and video sources may be employed in order to generate discussion

Examples:

Watch this video of two American people arguing about race. Work together and discuss the following:

a. Who are the people in the video?

Why are they arguing?

How could you help them to talk to each other in a more friendly way?

How would you explain this argument to a class of elementary school students?

Listen to this song and fill in the gaps in the lyric sheet. Work together and discuss the following:

What is the song about?

Why is the message of the song important today?

Write an extra verse for the song.

What would be the best way to explain this song to a class of elementary school students?

Fundamentals of English language teaching

While the lesson's goal is to get students to discuss/debate and present their own ideas, it is fundamentally important that the teacher also present content skillfully. In addition, the teacher should be monitoring and assessing the students' efforts carefully and learning from the experience. In other words, the teacher should also be learning from the experience of getting students to learn. Furthermore, the effort of monitoring and assessing the students' work should help the teacher to become a better presenter of material.

Practical expertise

Students should be engaged in communicative activities and working to

solve practical problems while discussing or debating in the English language. With regard to a Discussion & Debate course, this implies that the teacher must take care to introduce practical work clearly and effectively in order to get students involved in activities that help them to develop the target skills. For students who are prospective teachers, appropriate activities might include working collaboratively to devise lesson plans for younger students. The act of presenting ideas clearly and simply so that younger learners can understand sophisticated material raises awareness in our students and helps them to develop effective presentation skills. Group tasks that get students to discuss how best to generate discussion among younger learners provides a direct link between classes at Tsuru and practical experience of teacher training.

Motivation and independent learning

Ultimately, getting the students interested in the class content and getting them to enjoy communicative activities is going to be more important than methodology. Making use of attractive text-based, musical, or video content, for example, can help to make discussion-related activities more enjoyable and relevant. Enjoyable input of this sort can be tailored to enjoyable and stimulating discussion-related activities. Even so, motivation is not all about having fun. Careful monitoring and assessment by the teacher probably remains the most powerful motivational force available in the classroom. By the same token, careful assessment of students' work is extremely important in driving effective independent learning outside the classroom.

Current affairs

In order to maximize the relevance of content, the teacher is very likely to make use of video resources available online. Such materials should be current and provide an insight into the reality of events in Japan and elsewhere. The choice of stimulating, relevant topics is of particular importance in a Discussion & Debate course. Students are able to access such materials on their own handheld devices, making it easy for teachers to set up discussion or debate activities. Students should be encouraged to watch and listen to videos in which controversial issues are being discussed, and then work collaboratively in order to plan and make presentations on these topics. A natural extension of such activities for prospective teachers is to discuss and plan how to explain, simply and clearly, such sophisticated material to young learners.

Intercultural/multicultural awareness

In a complex, multilayered and diverse society, cultural challenges are common, especially in the classroom. Having intercultural skills is fundamental to teachers who work with a diverse group of students, as a teacher's professional attitude towards diversity in the classroom will positively influence and affect the students in all aspects of their lives. The goals of Tsuru University Teaching Program are to redefine and expand the role of English teacher in terms of diversity, train teachers in understanding methods and concepts of intercultural education in a multicultural society, and promote mutual respect and understanding among cultures. To this end, a Discussion & Debate course in particular should remain

sensitive to problems involving communication across races and cultures. In particular, our students should be given opportunities to think about how to get their students to think about related issues.

5. Conclusion

Most scholars agree that the aim of language teaching is to achieve communicative competence. And, communicative language teaching is a versatile approach, which permits teachers to draw on its critical strengths without needing to adopt an all-or-nothing view of it or abandon structurally-inclined syllabuses that instructors may feel bound to. As a professor of English language teaching (ELT) at the graduate school of Akita International University, I have had the opportunity to train, and observe English language teachers in elementary, junior high, high school and college levels in Japan. From these experiences, I have been able to make the following observations: In Japan, especially in high schools, two issues arise with respect to having real 'communicative' observations of English language classes in high schools in Japan, the teachers have in most cases resorted to teaching English through the grammar translation method (Yakudoku) rather than take chances with their levels of English, which by most parameters can be sufficient for what is needed by their students. The second issue is that "the need to use foreign language (English language) is not felt admitted into tertiary institutions in Japan. For the students and for the teachers, grammatical competence seems to be the goal. Even if grammatical competence alone is the goal of the learner, CLT is

doubtless one valuable means of achieving it. The problems that do exist with it – few of which are lethal – are in a sense diminished in light of this broad range of application it has, and the fact that it fills what was once a ‘communicative vacuum’ in pedagogy. While it may not provide the answer to all aspects of language teaching, its contribution nevertheless justifies its current prevalence. The introduction of English classes at elementary schools in Japan from 2011, with specific focus on implemented, it will not be too long before the Japanese students can match the proficiency levels of their counterparts in Korea, China and some other Asian countries. It is therefore my view that CLT should be actively encouraged in all English classrooms in Japan.

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