CLT and motivating learners to communicate

Roberto Rabbini and Robert Diem
Seigakuin University

Reference data:

Rabbini, R., & Diem, R. (2006). CLT and motivating learners to communicate.

In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Young adult learners face special challenges when trying to learn and speak English. A lack of motivation or low confidence may impede progress in their studies. Building the confidence of such students and heightening their motivation are essential goals of any English language program. In this paper, the authors will share and describe a variety of highly successful activities, which are student-led and involve a certain amount of personalization and have proven successful in fostering learners' confidence, motivation, and fluency. Firstly, however, we will appraise the theoretical basis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and identify its distinctive dimensions whilst attempting to determine the degree to which CLT is based on a theory of language as opposed to a theory of language learning.

大学生英語学習者が英語を話そうとする際、動機づけの欠如、自信のなさが問題となり学習を妨げていることがある。 そういった生徒の動機づけを高め自信をつけさせるのは、あらゆる英語学習プログラムにおいて不可欠な目標であるが、この論文では、筆者がこれまでおこなってきた生徒中心主義（student-led）の学習活動を紹介する。 この活動において、生徒中心ではあるが必要に応じ適宜フォローを行い、また他人ではなく生徒自身に関わる内容を扱うことによって、生徒の自信、動機付け、流暢さを養うことに成功してきた。

まず始めにコミュニカティブな言語指導（CLT）の理論的基礎について触れ、そしてCLTがどの程度言語理論に基づいているのかを検証しながら、その特性を指摘する。

How to motivate students to talk and build confidence so that they are encouraged to actively participate in class is essential to the success of any given English communication program. This is particularly true in Japan where many young adult learners remain at the false-beginner level in terms of their communicative ability even after six years of compulsory English education. One of the most important factors in achieving this goal of active participation is the type of materials and tasks the teacher adopts for use in the classroom. In this paper, we will share some tasks that have proven successful in the classroom, albeit from anecdotal evidence, by describing a variety of student-led activities that generate real communication and enhance conversational skills and strategies. Initially, however, we will appraise

the theoretical basis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and identify its distinctive features.

Communicative language teaching

Describing the nature of Communicative Language Teaching appears elusive considering the width of its scope and interpretation. This breadth is voiced by Thompson (1996) who points out that although in general abstract terms

> "CLT involves an emphasis on communicating by means of the foreign language…at the practical classroom end, CLT is strongly associated with a number of particular activity types, such as problem-solving and pair work. But in the middle ground, the area where theory meets practice, things become less certain" (p. 9).

Thompson interprets CLT as manifesting itself on three levels: *Approach* holds assumptions about language and language learning; *method* is the point at which theory is transformed into practice; and *technique* is the level that describes procedures for use in the classroom. However, it seems that for him the communicative method is a gray area of confusion and ambiguity in terms of whether it is positioned as an approach, method, or technique.

Diverse interpretations and implementations of CLT have developed in EFL classrooms throughout the world. As early as 1984, Howatt proposed a "strong" and a "weak" version of CLT, the former being a situation where the language system itself is harnessed, and the latter being a situation where learners are provided with opportunities to use their L2 communicatively. Nunan (1987) claimed that although the "weak" form of CLT has become standard EFL classroom practice in a variety of contexts and situations, the chances of genuine communicative interaction remain relatively low. He noticed on lessons he observed that traditional non-communicative activities such as drilling and error correction actually played a significant role in apparently communicative classes. Littlewood (1981, p.85) suggested that these types of activities be incorporated within a communicative framework, by differentiating between pre-communicative and communicative learning activities. The goal in the pre-communicative is to give learners fluent control over grammatical forms while the communicative stage is used for communicating meaning. Dekeyser (1998) echoes the usefulness of "pre-communicative" activities since fostering fluency requires the meaningful use of language while keeping relevant structural knowledge available.

Although the scope of CLT appears to be wide ranging, we can safely claim a number of authorities in the field agree that it specifies the need for communication, since "communicative competence is the desired goal (i.e., the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately)" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, p.92). Despite the fact that the sphere of CLT may be hard to pin down, in order to maintain syntactic consistency, and in view of the tremendous amount of literature it has generated, here we will refer to CLT as an *approach.* Next, we will determine the extent to which CLT is based on a theory of language as opposed to a theory of language learning.

Language theory in CLT

The crystallization of communicative ideas can be seen in Littlewood's (1981) seminal work. He highlights the point that it is the combination of structural and functional approaches to language as well as the recognition of social meaning in discourse, which underpin the communicative dimension. By combining these ideas, Littlewood impacted the EFL teaching profession greatly by laying the foundation for materials design and pedagogic procedures that are so common in current popular textbooks.

The foundations of CLT can be traced back to the revamping of structural linguistics led by Chomsky and his theory of transformational generative grammar introduced originally in his first major work in 1957 and developed further in 1965. Through syntactic analysis, Chomsky changed the direction of linguistic enquiry by promoting the idea of language as a rule-governed system in which native speakers can creatively manipulate the grammar to produce an infinite number of recognizable sentences. However, the abstract nature of this line of reasoning resulted in a number of linguists challenging Chomsky's assumptions about language and competence, which led to descriptions of competence in relation to actual instances of language use.

Hymes (1979) advanced the notion that grammatical competence was but one element in the drive to establish meaning. This widened the definition of competence to incorporate communicative ability, and laid the theoretical roots of CLT and included a sociolinguistic element that was extended and complemented by the works of other academics such as Halliday (1978) and Wilkins (1976).

From Chomsky to Halliday, and from Hymes to Littlewood, it is evident that a number of notions of language theory have provided the thrust behind the communicative approach; an opinion shared by Richards and Rodgers (1986) since "at the level of language theory, Communicative Language Teaching has a rich if somewhat eclectic, theoretical base" (p.71). Having briefly looked at language theory in CLT, we will next examine to what degree learning theories have had an impact on the approach.

Learning theory in CLT

It seems that learning theories associated with CLT came after the initial flurry of theories of language about the approach (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). They identify three broad principles:

1. The communication principle
2. The task principle
3. The meaningfulness principle

It is suggested that each task will promote learning as their assumption about the nature of linguistics and language learning is one of "language as communication" (Richards & Rodgers 1986, p.69). The first principle implies that learning can be enhanced through real communicative activities, the second that language used to complete meaningful tasks supports learning, and finally, language that is relevant and meaningful to the learner promotes learning. It should be noted that although these principles succinctly describe the conditions required to promote language learning, they do not refer to the processes of language acquisition.

Littlewood (1992) contends learning theory can be divided into two perspectives within a communicative framework. The first is a form of skill learning, while the other is learning as a form of natural growth. Although he suggests exploiting both types of learning, the activities he envisages using in this methodology are of familiar communicative fodder: information gap exchanges, pair-work tasks, and problem solving to name but some. Essentially, it appears that the learning theory dimension of CLT assumes that realistic, interesting, and purposeful activities and interaction will foster the development of communicative competence.

It would appear that CLT is based largely on developments in language theory much more so than language learning theory, though the latter has become increasingly relevant to the communicative approach. Although the vast majority of debates, dissemination, and discussions on CLT took place twenty years ago, the approach is still here and indeed a quick review of current textbooks reveals that many of the activities proposed two decades ago continue to be standard practice. In subsequent sections, we will describe a variety of these activities that have proven to be highly successful, but first we will address the rationale behind true communicative tasks.

Motivating students to communicate

Our main assumption about the communicative approach is based on the idea that activities and tasks that promote real and meaningful communication will be advantageous. From a communicative perspective, the main goal of activities is to elevate the students' oral/aural proficiency whilst building confidence in the target language through carefully scaffolded communicative activities. In Japan, group psychology, years of passive learning, and the grammatical syllabus adopted in secondary education, ensure that most teenagers in Japan remain at the false beginner/elementary level in proficiency. Such learners lack confidence in their productive skills and require communicative activities to activate the language they have learned, which simultaneously build their self-assurance. In light of this background, and given the monolingual nature of Japanese society and the lack of exposure to the target language outside the classroom, it is imperative that communicative textbooks adopt a task-based strategy with a blend of approaches and emphasis on communicative learning, in order to facilitate a greater sense of independence with the target language.

What do young adult learners in Japan need in order to help them reach communicative competence? Lyddon (2002) questions the communicative authenticity of a number of activities embedded in numerous EFL textbooks. He suggests the following criteria in order to ensure that truly communicative gains are attained:

- Look for ways to make students care about the activity's objective (e.g., by connecting it to their personal lives).
- Give students a stake in the activity (e.g., by letting students supply the content and/or by turning the activity into a meaningful task).
- Empower students to influence the way the activity unfolds (e.g., allow for student choice).
- Engage students cognitively (e.g., require them to process information purposefully) (p.195).

These points seem to be cogent and practical. After all, many learners face special challenges when trying to learn and speak English. A lack of motivation or low confidence may impede progress in their studies. Building the confidence of such students and heightening their motivation are essential goals of any English language program. For most learners, a chief factor in their language-learning motivation is "personal relevance" (Williams & Burden, 1997). Bridging the gap between linguistic and communicative competence entails creating an environment in which language is personally meaningful to the student whilst simultaneously providing structural support. That is, by providing them with opportunities that allow the development of fluency using low-level structures set in meaningful contexts, learners can only profit and begin to make tangible steps towards real communication. We believe that the false beginner in Japan will have studied structural rules to a surprisingly complex degree, yet may find it difficult to use, or indeed, may never have had an opportunity to use the language learned. As Long and Russell (1999) point out, "it seems reasonable after years of English classes focused on grammar, Japanese students would want more conversational practice, want to have more confidence and better speaking skills" (p. 27). Consequently, the belief that learning is facilitated by activities that include real communication may be the most suitable belief to adopt in the Japanese classroom.

Next, we will discuss three successful activities, which are student-led and involve some form of personalization. Such qualities are paramount in any task for students of this age range, as they develop their oral skills and confidence through a series of well-organized activities. Although all the examples are designed specifically for Japanese University students, they can be used in senior high schools as well and adapted to various proficiency levels. However, the activities described are not sequential, and do not always fully subscribe to the criteria for communicative gains mentioned earlier. The tasks seem to be highly interactive and effective in developing conversational skills, but it is important to remember that this claim is based only on several action research studies and from comments of some teachers who have employed the materials.

Schema activators

In accordance with CLT principles, activities should open with a schema activator, which taps the background knowledge of the students and focuses them on the topic. In one example, the class survey (see Appendix A), several statements must be checked as true or false by the students. This gets all learners actively involved in the task by personalizing it. It is an effective way to introduce the topic and facilitates student participation. This is done initially with the teacher having the students raise their hands according to their answers as the survey statements are read out. The teacher should count each TRUE and FALSE vote and write it on the board to make sure all students participate. As an alternative or follow-up, you could have students change the statements into questions and interview a partner. Personalization is key to motivating students in any given activity, and making the language relevant to the learners will help them to recognize its features and identify with it much more so than with abstract concepts. Activating

students' world knowledge basically involves getting the students focused on the topic or theme, which is going to be introduced. This may include eliciting vocabulary related to the topic or other brainstorming techniques, but essentially it means exploiting the students' own knowledge of both the theme and their L2. It can be complemented by simple teaching techniques that encourage students to speak up. For example, if you want students to be more outgoing - such as *volunteering* information - have the entire class stand up because any participation on their part is rewarded by being able to sit down. (It should be noted that it is wise not to let one person remain standing alone at the end of this exercise as embarrassment of the learner is not the goal. It is far more propitious to tell a handful of students who have not volunteered an answer to sit down together to prevent the possibility of feeling inadequate).

The drill

We have adapted simple, traditional activities, like the substitution drill, to make them more student-led and interesting (see Appendix B). However, it must be borne in mind that this activity does not fit into Nunan's (1988) definition of a student-centered curriculum as the content was not "derived through a process of consultation and negotiation with the learners" (p. 55). Here, the students drill each other with one playing the role of teacher and the other the student, but the student is not simply repeating. The student has to cognitively make specific changes from the "teacher's" prompts in order to successfully complete the task. Naturally, when the prompts have been completed, the roles are reversed and the new "teacher" enjoys his or her turn at taking *revenge*. Such an activity gives students the opportunity to develop both fluency and confidence, creates an autonomous learning environment, and provides them with a sense of empowerment. This turns a teacher-led audio-lingual technique into an exciting and motivating exercise which learners relish.

Pair reading

This is a student-led, task-based activity that engages learners via pairwork reading, stimulating both listening and speaking skills (see Appendix C) that can be extended into more of a learner-centered task. Not particularly original in concept, but novel in terms of the fact that such reading activities seem to be scarce in so–called *communicative* textbooks. Based on practicing and fostering aural-oral skills, the activity creates a need for students to exchange information involving practical language. In providing a situation where learners interact purposefully, the task thus complies with the criteria as set out by Richards and Rodgers above. It can be adapted to any level if you have the time to design your own discourse, and can be used with numerous topics and grammar structures. We have applied this activity to the topics of *family, home, dates and daily routines, money and shopping* and *directions* with very positive results shown in activity assessment surveys given to students, as well as anecdotal evidence from colleagues who have used the material.

First, split the students into pairs A and B. Explain that each student will read a different passage followed by some questions to ask their partner. Note that the readers of the passage have the answers next to their questions. Naturally,

students must not look at their partner's page, and indeed, it may be wiser to have the listeners close their books. They must listen carefully to their partner's stories and questions. Next, direct students to the "useful language" section written and drill. Encourage them to use such phrases when doing the pairwork activity. Designate partner 'A' as the first reader and remind students to listen carefully and to use English only. Also, ask them to use as much English as they can in answering number 6, which is a freer production question.

This activity can be adapted to pair dictation, where one student has to write down exactly what the other student says. It can be further extended by having students create a short passage about themselves, using the initial set up as a template. They then can write their own questions, again using the original blueprint as an aid. This will lead, in part, to meeting some of the guidelines as set out by Lyddon (2002). That is, this suggested extension would connect the language to the students' personal lives. Furthermore, it would, at least partially, let students supply the content in as far as they use the base pair-reading model to help them. It would also empower students to a degree by allowing for student choice in that they would be able to create their own questions. Finally, this extension appears to engage the students cognitively as it requires them to process information purposefully. Such a task encourages students to actively participate whilst fostering confidence and competence in the target structures.

Leverage

Important areas, such as conversation strategies and follow-up questions, should not only be highlighted in the back of any given communicative textbook, but should also be reinforced throughout the units. When mastered, these simple techniques can have a huge pay off for students. Even a small amount of time spent focusing on these communication strategies gives the students greater facility and leverage in the target language. From personal experience, students who try to adopt such techniques tend to sound more fluent and have consistently gained higher scores in oral tests.

Conclusion

This paper has examined and identified the salient features of CLT. It has also shown that the foundations of CLT are rooted within the framework of language theory, with valuable input from such academics as Hymes and Littlewood, and that learning theory did not impact the development of CLT until after its initial growth as an approach. However, a precise definition of CLT remains difficult to pin down, and we can conclude that the range and interpretation of it is indeed broad.

Through a brief review of the literature, it was also suggested that language in activities needs to be meaningful to the learner whilst still focusing on form. An important factor in motivating students is involving them in the tasks via personalization and by designing tasks that are student-led; that is, making students central to the activities and making the material relevant to the learners, it will increase their motivation to use the target language.

As regards to some of the activities described, we have shown how traditional, teacher-led activities can be

made more student-led and interesting. For example, we introduced a modified version of the basic substitution drill that required students to work in pairs with one student taking the role of the teacher. This turned an otherwise mundane drill into an engaging activity to the extent that it required the students to work together by leading and assisting one another, as well as taking responsibility for their own learning. In particular, the personalization involved in the extension of the pair-reading activity, seems to go some way toward meeting some of the criteria as laid out by Lyddon (2002).

The tasks described earlier seem to be highly interactive and help to develop conversational skills, although some caution is required as this assessment is based largely on material evaluation surveys given to students as well as feedback from teachers who have used them in the field. Yet this evidence, insufficient and unreliable as it is, nonetheless suggests that the activities and materials discussed above give students the tools to do the job in hand, and have, at least to an unspecified degree, proven successful in fostering their confidence, motivation, and fluency. It seems that CLT, which has been with us for more than twenty years, will continue to play a significant role and is likely to be with us well into the 21st century. Consequently, the research of communicative language teaching will no doubt continue, particularly so since the time for providing a fresh and updated evaluation of CLT is ripe.

Roberto Rabbini has been teaching English in Japan since 1994. He holds an M.A in Linguistics (TESOL) from Surrey University and is interested in teacher training, cross-cultural psychology, genre analysis and socio-cognitive variables on bilinguistic development. He currently teaches on the English Program at Seigakuin University. He can be reached at r_rabbini@seigakuin-univ.ac.jp.

Robert Diem has taught at both the secondary and university level for the past 12 years. In 1997 he received his M.A.T. in TESOL from The School for International Training. His interests include educational technology and materials development. He currently teaches at Seigakuin University and Kaisei Junior/Senior High School. He can be reached at diemrob@yahoo.com

References

Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structures.* The Hague: Mouton.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Dekeyser, R. M. (1998). Cognitive perspectives on learning and practicing L2 grammar. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp.42-63). New York: CUP.

Finocchiaro, M., & Brumfit, C. (1983). *The functional-notional approach*. New York: OUP.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as a social-semiotic: Interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). *A history of English language teaching.* Oxford: OUP.

Hymes, D. H. (1968). On communicative competence.

Extracts reprinted in C. J. Brumfit & K. Johnson (Eds.), (1979). *The communicative approach to language teaching*. Oxford: OUP.

Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative language teaching.* Cambridge: CUP.

Littlewood, W. (1992). *Teaching oral communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Long, R. W., & Russell, G. (1999). Student attitudinal change over an academic year. *The Language Teacher, 23*(10), 17-27.

Lyddon, P. (2002). Creating the conditions for real communication. *Proceedings of the JALT 2002 Conference (CD-rom),* (192-199). Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching.

Nunan, D. (1987). Communicative language teaching: Making it work. *ELT Journal*. Vol. 41/2.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centred curriculum.* Glasgow: CUP.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.

Thompson, G. (1996). Some misconceptions about communicative language teaching. *ELT Journal*. Vol. 50/1.

Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach.* Cambridge: CUP.

Wilkins, D. (1976). *Notional syllabuses.* Oxford: OUP.

Appendix A

Example of the schema activator class survey

Survey: Check True or False about yourself. Be ready to raise your hand for the survey

	True	False
1. Summer is my favorite season.	☐	☐
2. I traveled this summer.	☐	☐
3. I found a sweetheart during the break.	☐	☐
4. I swam in a river this summer.	☐	☐
5. I spoke English during summer vacation.	☐	☐

Appendix B

Example of Student-centered drilling activity

Pairwork Drill: Read the underlined parts to your partner. Your partner must repeat the entire sentence without looking. Change roles.

1 Where is she from?
Where is he from?
Where are you from?
Where are they from?

2 I want to become a doctor.
She wants to become a doctor.
They want to become doctors.
Taro wants to become a doctor.

3 Is she a student?
Are they students?
Are you a student?
Is he a student?

4 She lives in Omiya.
Taro and Maki live in Omiya
I live in Omiya.
He lives in Omiya.

Appendix C

Example of Pair Reading activity

Student A

What does_____mean?

Could you read it again, please?

Could you repeat the question, please?

Please read slower.

Read this to your partner

My name is Takako Kimura. I'm from Fukuoka, Japan. I live in Hakata with my 3 cats. I want to become a doctor. I'm a student at Kyushu University. I like to play golf and watch movies in my free time. In the future I want to travel around the world for a year.

Now ask your partner these questions

1. Where is Takako Kimura from? ***She's from Fukuoka, Japan***
2. How many cats does she have? ***She has 3.***
3. What does Takako do? ***She's a student***
4. What are her hobbies? ***She likes to play golf and watch movies***
5. What does she want to do in the future? ***She wants to travel around the world for a year.***
6. Please tell me everything you remember about Takako Kimura.

Student B

What does_____mean?

Could you read it again, please?

Could you repeat the question, please?

Please read slower.

Read this to your partner

I'm Ken Sato. I'm from Fukushima, but now I live in Ikebukuro. I'm single, but I want to have many girlfriends. I'm a student at Rikkyo University. My major is design. Now I work part-time at a convenience store. I like to watch videos in my free time. Next year I want to study at an overseas university.

Now ask your partner these questions

1. Where does Ken Sato live now? In Ikebukuro.
2. What is Ken's major? Design.
3. What does he do now? He's a university student / works part-time at a convenience store.
4. What does he like to do in his free time? He likes to watch videos.
5. What does he want to do in the future? He wants to study at an overseas University.
6. Please tell me everything you remember about Ken Sato.