On Communicative Language Teaching

— Theoretical Foundations and Principles

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Abstract

Theory of language, communicative competence, functional account of language use, discourse analysis and social-linguistic considerations have mainly made up the theoretical foundations of communicative approach to language teaching. The principles contain taking communication as the center, reflecting Real Communicating Process, avoiding Constant Error-correcting, and putting grammar at a right place.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, Communicative approach, Foundations and principles

Communicative approach to language teaching has popularized in the area of foreign language teaching all over the world for years. For the purpose of conducting this approach in teaching foreign language efficiently and fully, there is a necessity for educators to get acknowledged about the theoretical foundaftions and principles lying behind the specific methods to avoid misusing or misleading.

1. The theoretical foundations of CLT

1.1 Theory of language

Assumptions in CLT are that language is social behavior, which concerns conveyance of meaning, i.e. the grammar of a language is a means of organizing meaning; language is about making texts, connected discourse (not sentences in isolation); knowing a language means knowing the grammatical rules and knowing the rules and conventions of the speech community; language is not seen as comprised of four skills (reading/writing/speaking/listening), but of various abilities.

At the level of language theory, Communicative Language Teaching has a rich, if somewhat eclectic, theory base:

1) Language is a system for the expression of meaning.

2) The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.

3) The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.

4) The primary unit of language is not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse. (Richards,J.C. and Rodgers, T.S, 1986)

Language proficiency is a multifaceted modality, consisting of various levels of abilities domains. H.H.Stern(1983) has listed four aspects of language proficiency:

1) The intuitive mastery of the forms of language

2) The intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociolcultural meanings expressed by the language forms

3) The capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form

4) The creativity of language use

Hymes (1971) assumes that L2 learners need to know not only the linguistic knowledge but also the culturally acceptable ways of interacting with others in different situations and relationships. His theory of communicative competence (1971) consists of the interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and probabilistic

language components. Built on Hymes' theory, Canale and Swain (1980) propose the communicative competence, which reflects the use of the linguistic system and the functional aspects of communication respectively.

1.2 On communicative competence

Communicative competence is the core of Communicative Approach. Taken very broadly, communicative competence is the ability to interact well with others, or it is, "the ability to communicate in a personally effective and socially appropriate manner" (Trenholm and Jensen, 1988)

An analysis of communicative competence is found in Canale and Swain (1980), that the communicative competence is made up of four major strands:

"grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980)

"Grammatical competence is an umbrella concept that includes increasing expertise in grammar (morphology, syntax), vocabulary, and mechanics. With regards to speaking, the term mechanics refers to basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation, and stress" (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). In order to convey meaning, EFL learners must have the knowledge of words and sentences; that is, they must understand how words are segmented into various sounds, and how sentences are stressed in particular ways. Thus, grammatical competence enables speakers to use and understand English language structures accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency.

Sociolinguistic competence is that which involves knowing what is expected socially and culturally by users of the target language. Knowledge of language alone does not adequately prepare learners for effective and appropriate use of the target language. Learners must acquire the rules and norms governing the appropriate timing and realization of speech acts. Understanding the sociolinguistic side of language helps learners know what comments are appropriate, how to respond nonverbally according to the purpose of the talk. Therefore, "adult second language learners must acquire stylistic adaptability in order to able to encode and decode the discourse around them correctly" (Brown, 1988)

Discourse competence is concerned with intersentential relationships. In discourse, whether formal or informal, the rules of cohesion and coherence apply, which aids in holding the communication together in a meaningful way. In communication both the production and comprehension of a language require one's ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, and to formulate representations of meaning from referents in both previous sentences and following sentences. Therefore, effective speakers should acquire a large repertoire of structures and discourse markers to express ideas, show relationships of time, and indicate cause, contrast, and emphasis. With these, learners can manage turn-taking in conversation.

Strategic competence, which is "the way learners manipulate language in order to meet communicative goals"competence elements. Put simply, it is the ability to compensate for imperfect knowledge of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse rules. With reference to speaking, strategic competence refers to the ability to know how to keep a conversation going, how to terminate the conversation, and how to clear up communication breakdown as well as comprehension problems. The development of the learner's ability to use communicative strategies may be:

1) by assuming to be transferable from the learner's L1 usage;

2) by creating situation and setting tasks (e.g. role play and simulations) which require the operation of planning, execution, evaluation and repair strategies;

3) by using awareness-raising techniques (e.g. recording and analysis of role plays and simulations);

4) by encouraging or requiring learners to focus on and follow explicit strategic procedures as the need arises.

To clarify, "grammatical competence refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and what Hymes intends by what is 'formally possible'. It is the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity, Sociolinguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. Discourse competence refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text. Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies that communications employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communicational." (Richards, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. 1986)

The Communicative Approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes referred to as "communicative competence". Hymes coined this term in order to contrast a communicative view of language with Chomsky's theory of competence.

For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language. Linguistic competence simply means "knowledge of the language system" grammatical knowledge in other words. But from the overall underling knowledge and ability for language use that the speaker-listener possesses. The competence involves far more than knowledge of (and ability for)

grammaticality. There are, in Hymes' words, "rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless." Indeed, if a speaker were to produce grammatical sentences without regard to the situations in which they were being used, he would certainly be regarded deranged. Competence seen as overall underling linguistic knowledge and ability thus includes concepts of appropriateness and acceptability----notion which in Chomsky are associated with performance----and the study of competence will inevitably entail consideration of such variables as attitude, notivation, and a number of socio-cultural factors. There are the "several sectors of communicative competence, of which the grammatical is one." Hymes lists four sectors:

1) whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;

2) whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;

3) whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;

4) whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. (Hymes, 1973)

The first, "whether or not something is formally possible" is roughly equivalent to Chomsky's restricted notion of competence as grammaticality. It is concerned with whether a language permits a structure as grammatical (possible) or rejects it as ungrammatical (impossible).

The second sector deals with feasibility. A sentence like " the mouse the cat the dog the man the woman married beat chased ate had a white tail" is grammatically possiblem but is hardly feasible. Because of our restricted powers of processing, such a sentence can not in any real sense be said to form part of our competence.

The third sector covers "appropriateness to context". The speaker-listener's underlying competence includes "rules of appropriateness ", and a sentence can be grammatically possible, feasible, but inappropriate.

Hymes' final sector relates to the area that we commonly refer to as "accepted usage". A sentence may be possible, feasible, appropriate, but not occur.

Once the linguistic competence in these terms is considered, Hymes claims that it is similar to competence that underlies communicative system other than language. This general applicability of the term gives Hymes particular justification for referring to "communicative competence", in contrast to Chomsky's narrow notion "grammatical competence". Hymes' theory of communicative competence was a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. Hymes held that communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use. This theory offers a much more comprehensive view of competence.

Hymes suggests, then, that linguistic competence is but sub-division of a greater whole-communicative competence. Language is but one mode of communication among others, and full communication involves mastery of all the codes-gesture, position, non-verbal vocalization, use of visual aids and so on. And language itself varies from situation to situation, from communicative dyad to communicative dyad; bilingual multilingual people. These constraints on language use are as important as the rules of grammar. Hymes writes:

"The acquisition of such competency is of course fed by social experience, needs, and motives, and issues in action that is itself a renewed source of motives, needs, experience…. A model of language must design it with a face toward communicative conduct and social life."

1.3 Functional account of language use

Another linguistic theory of communication favored in CLT is Halliday's functional account of language use. "Linguistics … is concerned… with the description of speech acts or texts, since only through the study of language in use are all the functions of language, and therefore all components of meaning, brought into focus" (Halliday, 1973). In a number of influential books and papers, Halliday has elaborated a powerful theory of the functions of language, which complements Hymes' view of communicative competence. He described (1964) seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their first language:

1) the instrumental function: using language to get thing;

2) the regulatory function: using language to control the behavior of others;

3) the interactional function: using language to create interaction with others;

4) the personal function: using language to express personal feeling and meanings;

5) the heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover

6) the imaginative function: using language to create a world of imagination;

7) the representation function: using language to communicate information.

Learning a second language was similarly viewed by proponents of Communicative Language Teaching as an acquiring

the linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions.

Hymes' theory of communicative competence and Halliday's functional account of language use are the current linguistic theories of communication favored by Communicative Language Teaching.

1.4 Discourse analysis

The works in discourse analysis are directly relevant to language teaching. The more influential linguist is Halliday. The title of his paper "Towards a Sociological Semantics" suggests Halliday is here concerned with the way in which linguistics may help the sociologist in his " search for explanations of social phenomena". Since language is not always used in social contexts, this circumscribes the scope of the study. But as he says, if we consider language in relation to the contexts within which it is used we shall certainly learn something about the way language operates as a system. " The more", Halliday says, "we   are able to relate the options in grammatical systems to meaning potential in the social contexts and behaviors settings, the more insight we shall gain into the nature of the language system, since it is in the service of such contexts and settings that language has evolved".

Halliday is concerned with three levels of analysis and the relationship among them. Each level is characterized as containing a set of options---- a set of choices that the individual can make. At the level of behavior, in any given context, the individual has various choices of action and Halliday calls this a "behavior potential". They are choices as to what the individual " can do", and one large set of options within this behavior potential is linguistics. The individual can choose to say or write something. If he selects to do this, he is faced with a further set of choice on the level of semantics. This set of choices is the "meaning potential" ----what the individual "can mean". Then, once he has selected what to mean, there are more choices he has to make at the grammatical level. These choices represent the various ways the language system provides for expressing his meaning. We might say that at this level the individual has a choice as to what he "can form".

Halliday illustrates the problem of relating these three levels of analysis---the behavioral, the semantic and grammatical---by means of an example:

A boy brings home an object that he has found on a building site. His mother wishes to express her disapproval. There are several "behavior options" open to her, including non-linguistic ones like smacking the child. If she decides on a linguistic option, scolding the child in some way, there are various things she can say.

Halliday points out, there are two ways of analyzing such utterances. On the behavioral level we can analyze them in terms of categories like "threat of punishment" or"emotional appeal"and so son. The alternative is a grammatical analysis in which we would treat the sentence as an exemplification of particular grammatical structure.

But done in this way, the behavioral analysis would provide us with no information on how the various behavioral categories may be realized by the grammar of the language. It does not tell us for example how we "threaten punishment" or " appeal through emotion" in English. Similarly, the grammatical analysis makes no attempt to relate the grammatical features to the behavioral categories they realize. Neither analysis would, in Halliday's terminology, relate behavior options to grammatical options.

1.5 Socio-linguistic considerations

The emphasis of teaching in Communicative Approach has shifted from the preoccupation with structure to the communicative purpose of the speech act. However, neither grammar nor situation is excluded or neglected, but these are no long considered the primary focus of curriculum. The primary focus is the learner and the function or function of language—the communicative purpose he wishes to express and to understand.

Since a speech act—communication—takes place in definite but varied socio-linguistic situations, both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors have been taken into consideration. The approach takes cognizance of the fact that the social roles and the psychological attitudes of the participants toward each other in a conversation (employer—employee, teacher—pupil, doctor—patient, parent—child, for example), the place and time of the communication act, and the activity or topic being discussed will determine to a large extent the form, tone, and appropriateness of any oral or written message.

While communicative behavior is always conditional and therefore subject to infinite variation, we should like to single out three factors that underlie any speech act:

1) The functions that language serves in real-world, everyday use;

2) The varieties of language which are possible within each of the functions;

3) The shared socio-cultural allusions—which some others called presuppositions—which not only are necessary to a complete understanding of the oral or written messages, but also determine their acceptability or appropriateness.

2. The principles of CLT

2.1 Communication-centered

The primary principle of CLT is that all activities managed and carried in classrooms are supposed to be communication-centered and serve for the goal of communication. What teachers and students do during the classroom can be divided into two types: one is directly communicative activities. On listening it can be listening to weather broadcasting; on speaking it may be asking ways in a new city; on reading it could be understanding a series of instructions; on writing it can be writing a letter for booking a room in the hotel, so on and so forth. These activities are graded by students' language level. The other is indirectly communicative activities. The activity itself is not a communicative one but of use and related to communicative tasks.

2.2 Reflecting real communicating process

An important sign to distinct CLT and other approaches/methods is the former tries to reflect the process of language using for communication during classrooms. In real life, the   communicating forms between people and languages used   are various . Then how can language teaching show this process? As we know, there exist common characters of people's communication; during communicating processes there exist also something universal. It is these common , universal characteristics that CLT emphasizes and that ought to be paid attention to in the classroom teaching. The communicating characteristics can be generally classified as: information gap, free choice and information feedback. (Xu Tsiang, 2000)

1)   Information Gap

When people talk to each other in real life it is normally in order to bridge and information gap of some kind that exists between them. Because of this there is always some doubt in a listener's mind as to what a speaker is going to say next. If there is no doubt, no information gap, then communication does not take place, because the listener has no need to pay attention to what is being said since he already knows what it will be. In real life, of course, this is a very rare situation indeed. CLT advocates to put students in positions where they must practise bridging information gaps. Equally they must practise processing what is said to them so that they must practise processing what is said to them so that they can respond appropriately in real time.

2)   Free Choice

"Free choice" refers to what and how people say is completely chosen by themselves. In real-life communication, the speaker himself decides not only what he intends to express but use what language form to express appropriately without being controlled by others.

In face-to-face communication his choice is made under the pressure of time. The ability to select language forms under time pressure is an important aspect of communicative competence and also a difficult point for foreign language learners. Meanwhile, as the speaker should make choices spontaneously, the listener doesn't possibly predict what the other party tends to say. That is, the language of the two sides is , to a large degree, arbitrary and unpredictable. For language teaching, if the language used by students is controlled by the teacher, it will be difficult to develop their communicative competence. Hence CLT designs classroom practice as allowing the students to decide by themselves what and how to express to achieve the goal of developing communicative competence.

3)   Information Feedback

This refers to the two sides make proper adjustment according to the information of the other party. There is always a goal for the communication. The goal of one party may be offering invitation, giving opinion, expressing dissatisfaction and asking for help, etc.; while that of the other may be resistance or declining, etc. People in communication always keep in mind of the goal and try to achieve it. Therefore whatever he says is around the goal; while he also evaluates by this goal what other people transmit to him. This strategy of making corresponding adjustment according to information feedback of the opposite is an important point in language communicative competence. Classroom practice of CLT tends to help students, during the process of completing their communicative tasks, improve their ability of judging the opposite's language, tone and attitude, and the ability of making corresponding language reaction for achieving their own communicative goals.

2.3 Avoiding constant error-correcting

Another remarkable characteristic that makes CLT different with other approaches/methods is the tolerant attitude toward students' errors, especially grammatical errors. As mentioned above, CLT put stress on transmitting meaning, free choice of language form and achievement of communicative goal. During the process of completing communicative tasks and carrying on communicative activities, students would probably encounter new language phenomena or pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar not yet mastered.   In order to express their own meaning, the students will usually use some wrong language forms or expressions. Traditional teaching methods put stress on correctness of language use and intend to correct students' every error. On the contrary, CLT thinks this will make

students be afraid of making mistakes and discourage them to express themselves bravely. The result is preventing them from communicating freely.

According to CLT, in the process of language learning, making mistakes is normal and shows that the student *is* trying using the language, which is obviously not bad. Besides that, the goal of the students' learning foreign languages is to get things done successfully and to communicate with other people. There is no need (actually it is extremely difficult) for foreign students to approach the level of the native speakers on every aspect.

In fact, it is not that CLT does not correct students' errors at all, but it treats different errors respectively. It has been pointed out that the errors definitely ought to be corrected which may violate the listener or reader and which occur frequently. However, no matter it is serious or slight, correcting every error can have an opposite function. Now foreign language educators generally agree that the tolerence of spoken or written errors will benefit students on confidently using the language to communicate.

2.4 Grammar in CLT

Discussions of CLT not infrequently lead to questions of grammatical or formal accuracy. The perceived displacement of attention toward morphosyntactical features in learners' expression in favor of a focus on meaning has led in some cases to the impression that grammar is not important, or that proponents of CLT favor learners' ability to express themselves, without regard to form.

While involvement in communicative events is seen as central to language development, this involvement necessarily requires attention to form. Communication cannot take place in the absence of structure, or grammar, a set of shared assumptions about how language works, along with a willingness of participants to cooperate in the negotiation of meaning. In their carefully researched and widely cited paper proposing components of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) did not suggest that grammar was unimportant. They sought rather to situate grammatical competence within a more broadly defined communicative competence. Similarly, the findings of the Savignon (1971) study did not suggest that teachers forsake grammar instruction. Rather, the replacement of structure drills in a language laboratory with self-expression focused on meaning was found to a more effective way to develop communicative ability with no loss of morphosyntactical accuracy. Learners' performance on tests of discrete morphosyntactical features was not a good predictor of their performance on a series of integrative communicative tasks.

The nature of the contribution to language development of both form-focused and meaning-focused classroom activity remains a question in ongoing research. The optimal combination of these activities in any given instructional setting depends no doubt on learners' age, the nature and length of instructional sequence, the opportunities for language contact outside the classroom, teacher preparation, and other factors. For the development of communicative competence, however, research findings overwhelming support the integration of form-focused exercises and meaning-focused experience. Grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences (Ellis, 1994). Nor shold explicit attention to form be perceived as limited to sentence-level morphosyntactical features. Broader features of discourse, sociolinguistic rules of appropriateness, and communication strategies themselves may be included. (Savignon, 2002)

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