MAIN APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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The ever-growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world. Millions of people today want to improve their command of English or to ensure that their children achieve a good command of English. And opportunities to learn English are provided in many different ways such as through formal instruction, travel, study abroad, as well as through the media and the Internet. The worldwide demand for English has created an enormous demand for quality language teaching and language teaching materials and resources. Learners set themselves demanding goals. They want to be able to master English to a high level of accuracy and fluency. Employers, too, insist that their employees have good English language skills, and fluency in English is a prerequisite for success and advancement in many fields of employment in today's world. The demand for an appropriate teaching methodology is therefore as strong as ever.

In this article we will examine the methodology known as communicative language teaching, or CLT, and explore the assumptions it is based on, its origins and evolution since it was first proposed in the 1970s, and how it has influenced approaches to language teaching today. Since its inception in the 1970s, CLT has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practice around the world. Many of the issues raised by a communicative teaching methodology are still relevant today, though teachers who are relatively new to the profession may not be familiar with them. This article therefore serves to review what we have learned from CLT and what its relevance is today.

Perhaps the majority of language teachers today, when asked to identify the methodology they employ in their classrooms, mention "communicative" as the methodology of choice. However, when pressed to give a detailed account of what they mean by "communicative," explanations vary widely.

1. People learn a language best when using it to do things rather than through studying how language works and practicing rules.

2. Grammar is no longer important in language teaching.

3. People learn a language through communicating in it.

4. Errors are not important in speaking a language.

5. CLT is only concerned with teaching speaking.

6. Classroom activities should be meaningful and involve real communication.

7. Dialogs are not used in CLT.

8. Both accuracy and fluency are goals in CLT.

9. CLT is usually described as a method of teaching.

Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom. Let us examine each of these issues in turn.

Communicative language teaching sets as its goal the teaching of communicative competence. What does this term mean? Perhaps we can clarify this term by first comparing it with the concept of grammatical competence. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge we have of a language that accounts for our ability to produce sentences in a language. It refers to knowledge of the building blocks of sentences (e.g., parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) and how sentences are formed. Grammatical competence is the focus of many grammar practice books, which typically present a rule of grammar on one page, and provide exercises to practice using the rule on the other page. The unit of analysis and practice is typically the sentence. While grammatical competence is an important dimension of language learning, it is clearly not all that is involved in learning a language since one can master the rules of sentence formation in a language and still not be very successful at being able to use the language for meaningful communication. It is the latter capacity which is understood by the term communicative competence.

Communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

-Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions

-Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication)

-Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)

-Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies)

Our understanding of the processes of second language learning has changed considerably in the last 30 years and CLT is partly a response to these changes

in understanding. Earlier views of language learning focused primarily on the

mastery of grammatical competence. Language learning was viewed as a process

of mechanical habit formation. Good habits are formed by having students produce correct sentences and not through making mistakes. Errors were to be avoided through controlled opportunities for production (either written or spoken). By memorizing dialogs and performing drills, the chances of making mistakes were minimized. Learning was very much seen as under the control of the teacher.

In recent years, language learning has been viewed from a very different perspective. It is seen as resulting from processes such as:

-Interaction between the learner and users of the language

-Creating meaningful and purposeful interaction through language

-Negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor arrive at understanding

-Learning through attending to the feedback learners get when they use the language

-Paying attention to the language one hears (the input) and trying to incorporate new forms into one's developing communicative competence

-Trying out and experimenting with different ways of saying things

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