

EVALUATING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF
ADOPTING A CLT APPROACH
IN AN ENGLISH CONVERSATION CLASSROOM IN JAPAN

Paul Raine

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Introduction

In this report I aim to evaluate the appropriateness and possibility of adopting a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in my current teaching environment. In the first section, I offer three different but related conceptions of a CLT approach: as defined with reference to features and principles inferable from CLT practices (1.1); as defined with reference to the notion of ‘communicative competence’ (1.2); and Ellis’s (1982) ‘informal’ approach (1.3). In the second section I analyze my current teaching environment in terms of: institutional constraints (2.2); student motivation (2.3); affective factors (2.4); and learning styles and culture (2.5). In the third section I evaluate the appropriateness and possibility of adopting each of the previously discussed CLT approaches in relation to the factors of my teaching environment previously analyzed. In the fourth and final section, I conclude the report with a cautious view as to whether a CLT approach should be further adopted in my current teaching environment.

1. Communicative Language Teaching

According to Knight (2007, p.155), communicative language teaching “can be said to be the current dominant methodology” in teaching English as a foreign language. Brown (2007, p.5) also acknowledges that CLT is “accepted as ‘normal’ and as our current ‘paradigm’”.

The development of CLT was a reaction to the perceived failure of methods such as Situational Language Teaching, which was engendering students who “could produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom.” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p.121)

Although we can trace the historical origins of CLT, a modern conception of the approach has proved problematic to state definitively, and in fact, as Ellis (1982, p.73) suggests, “(CLT) has no clearly understood and received meaning when it is applied to language teaching. Rather it is used to cover a variety of approaches.”

In their analysis of CLT, Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.172) posit that it “refers to a diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language and language learning”. A workable definition of CLT might therefore be gleaned from enumerating

and analyzing such features and principles, which the authors claim, “can be inferred from CLT practices” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.161)

1.1 Principles and features of CLT

The most prominent principles of communicative language learning according to Richards and Rodgers are the communication principle, the task principle and the meaningfulness principle (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.161). In other words, the authors suggest, language-learning activities in a CLT classroom involve real communication, consist of meaningful tasks, and allow the learner to utilize language that is meaningful to them.

Further features of CLT that have been propounded and subsequently accepted by a variety of linguistic scholars (Nunan, 1991; Williams, 1995; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 2001) are discussed below.

1.1.1 Use of authentic texts

Authentic texts are those which can be found in real-life environments, and include movie reviews, bus timetables, holiday brochures, and any other kind of publication or material, which native speakers might expect to encounter every day. There is also the notion of ‘semi-authentic’, which refers to authentic materials that have been slightly modified to better match the level of the language learner. In a communicative sense, this kind of material may be an acceptable compromise between fully authentic and wholly artificial materials.

1.1.2 Focus on the learning process

A focus on the learning process implies that teachers should be more concerned with *how* learners acquire language as opposed to *what* learners need to cover. Such activities might include “drama, extensive reading, role-play, communication games, and debates” which serve to “provide opportunities to experiment with language, to listen to and produce a wide range of vocabulary and language functions, and to negotiate meaning in interaction with other learners” (Hedge, 2000, p.359)

1.1.3 Focus on the learner’s personal experiences

A focus on the learner's personal experiences involves learners relaying personal information or recounting personal experiences, and provides a way to express ideas and information meaningful to them. Such information will not normally be known to other students (with the exception of friends) and thus create the information gap which, in line with a CLT approach, is required for meaningful communication.

1.1.4 Linking language learning in the classroom with language activation outside the classroom

Linking language learning in the classroom with language activation outside the classroom implies practicing the target language in 'real life' situations. Although Nunan (1995, p.139) concedes "In practical terms, it is obviously much easier to encourage learners to activate their language outside of the classroom in L2 contexts... and situations where English is widely spoken within the community" he also suggests that it is not impossible in L1 contexts, and offers examples including "English language newspapers, radio and television, international hotels and airline offices, multinational companies, and international airports." (Nunan, 1995, p.139)

1.1.5 Emphasis on tasks that encourage the negotiation of meaning

The negotiation of meaning entails putting learners in a communicative situation where they are obliged to make themselves understood "by speaking slowly, for example, or repeating or clarifying their ideas through rephrasing" (Hedge, 2000, p.13) Such negotiation is believed to encourage learners to produce more accurate and appropriate language, which in turn provides further input for other learners.

1.1.6 Grammar, encouragement of risk-taking and tolerance of errors

Encouragement of risk-taking and the tolerance of errors are related tenets. It has been suggested that adopting a CLT approach entails allowing errors in form to go uncorrected, and that the only error correction should be related to meaning. Obviously, if risk-taking is encouraged, then there is likely to be a higher frequency of errors relating to form. However, from a communicative viewpoint, such errors are "seen as reflections of a learner's stage of interlanguage development" (Hedge, 2000, p.15), and as such not necessarily negative. More recently, the merits and relevancy of focusing on

form and error treatment have been reevaluated (Williams, 1995; Thompson, 1996) and it has been argued that grammar instruction and error correction are necessary elements of a CLT approach.

Williams (1995) concludes from her research that a higher level of accuracy can be achieved from an increased focus on form in the communicative classroom, and that treatment should ideally involve an explicit explanation of the rules and feedback when a learner makes a form-based error.

In relation to grammar, Thompson (1996, p.11) suggests:

“Wherever possible, learners are first exposed to new language in a comprehensible context, so that they are able to understand its function and meaning. Only then is their attention turned to examining the grammatical forms that have been used to convey that meaning. The discussion of grammar is explicit, but it is the learners who are doing most of the discussing, working out—with guidance from the teacher—as much of their new knowledge of the language as can easily and usefully be expressed.”

1.2 A communicative view of language

Hedge (2000, p.45) states that a communicative approach “has, as one of its bases, a concept of what it means to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations”. The concept she is referring to is that of ‘communicative competence’.

The latest manifestation of communicative competence has resulted in five currently recognized categories: linguistic competence; pragmatic competence; discourse competence; strategic competence; and fluency (Hedge, 2000, p.46).

Linguistic competence is the ability to use language form (e.g. grammar, syntax, spelling and pronunciation) correctly; pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence, that is being able to interpret and manipulate the nuance of meaning attached to any utterance, and sociolinguistic competence, which includes factors such as register, tone and degree of politeness; discourse competence concerns the speaker-listener’s ability to participate in a conversation with regards to turn-taking,

maintaining a conversation and developing a topic; strategic competence relates to the ability to express oneself in the second language notwithstanding a lack of appropriate vocabulary or linguistic knowledge to do so, for example by employing circumlocution; fluency refers to a fluid and unhesitant production of speech.

1.3 Ellis's 'informal' approach

Under his 'informal' approach for language acquisition, Ellis (1982) adopts a strict interpretation as to what kind of classroom activities can actually be classed as 'communicative'. He stipulates five conditions that must be met: success must be measured by outcome, not process; the focus must be on what speakers say rather than how they say it; there must be an information gap; communication must be negotiated rather than pre-determined; and speakers must be allowed to use whatever resources of communication they possess.

He concludes, "many so-called 'communicative materials' will reveal that, with regard to acquisition at least, they fail to meet these five conditions and hence, in this sense, are not communicative" (Ellis, 1982, p.75). In this regard, he laments, "the conditions call for the teacher to relinquish control of the teaching/learning process in favour of the pupil, and understandably few teachers are prepared to venture so far." (Ellis, 1982, p.77)

In his explication of a methodology for 'informal' communicative acquisition of language, Ellis lays down two key elements of a CLT classroom. The first is that the teacher must not operate as a 'knower', but rather should "function as 'onlooker', having set up pair or group work" or "act as a 'partner' in much the same way as does the parent in first language acquisition." (Ellis, 1982, p.76)

The second is that traditional error-correction procedures must be rejected in favor of "the kinds of devices used by the parent in communication with the child: repetitions, expansions, extensions, prompting and modeling." (Ellis, 1982, p.76) He concludes therefore that "even if the materials are 'communicative', their value for acquisition will be lost if the teacher insists on a pedagogic role and on rigorous formal correction procedures." (Ellis, 1982, p.76)

2. My current teaching environment

2.1 Overview

I teach English at a technology university in Japan. The university specializes in the provision of courses in engineering, computing, mathematics, and other technological and scientific disciplines. My students are aged 18 to 22 and about 90% male. They are classified by the university as ‘elementary level’ English students. All of them have prior experience learning English, as it is a compulsory subject from at least Junior High School (age 12). There is some exposure to English in Japanese culture through Western media, such as Hollywood movies, music, television, and the Internet. However, English language media is dominated by its equivalent in Japanese in almost all situations. English ability is generally considered advantageous in finding employment in science and technology related sectors, but not necessarily an indispensable requirement.

2.2 Institutional constraints

Although I teach at a university, I have no direct professional relationship with them, and am instead employed by an agency which itself contracts with the university. Therefore my relationship with the institution at which I teach is somewhat oblique. There is no communication relating to course content or teaching approach between the university and the teachers. Rather, course content is decided by the agency in concordance with the university. Teachers are informed of the specified syllabus, and there is no negotiation of curriculum.

The prescribed textbook is *English Firsthand Success* (Helgesen et al., 2006). At my institution the teacher has no choice about whether to utilize this textbook or not. In fact it *must be used in every lesson, for the duration of the lesson, and the syllabus must be covered*. This is partly due to the fact that in previous years, students have complained, they purchased a textbook, only to discover that the teacher preferred to, as they perceived it, ‘play games’. The imposition of this textbook is a considerable and substantial factor in relation to the extent to which a CLT approach can be adopted in my current teaching environment, and much of this report addresses whether the textbook satisfies a communicative approach, or may be adapted to do so.

2.3 Student motivation

In order to ascertain the motivation of my students, I conducted a questionnaire based on that provided by Hedge (2000, p.22) and translated into Japanese. I teach a total of 60 students, and every student completed the questionnaire. They were asked to choose from a list of ten reasons, four of the most important to them for studying English. My results were in fact very similar to those revealed by Hedge's (2000, p.22) implementation of the survey. The number denotes how many times each reason was cited.

To be able to communicate with people in an international language, both at home in Japan and while traveling in other countries	49
To be able to read a wide range of English language sources for study purposes both abroad and in Japan	48
To be able to read and listen to English language media for information and pleasure	34
To take up a particular career, e.g. English language teaching or work in an international company	27
To have a better chance of employment, status, and financial reward in the job market	25
For course credit	22
Because it's a compulsory course	14
To find out more about the people, places, politics etc. of English-speaking cultures	11
To be able to participate successfully in a home stay	8
Because of parental pressure	2

Table 1: Reasons for studying English

2.4 Affective factors

According to Hedge (2000, p.21), affective factors include those such as “attitude, anxiety, competitiveness, and other emotional responses”. The affective filter can be construed as a barrier to language acquisition formed by such factors, which is high for students who have “generally negative attitudes towards learning English.” (Hedge, 2000, p.21)

As Hedge (2000, p.20) notes, it is difficult to gather reliable data about affective factors using questionnaires and other introspective research techniques. Therefore, such an attempt has been omitted in the current line of enquiry. However, in a general description gleaned from observation and experience, I would be strongly inclined to suggest that many of my students have a high affective filter.

2.5 Learning styles and culture

Unfortunately, due to institutional time constraints, and inability to obtain informed consent, it has not been possible to conduct research into my current students’ learning styles. It is therefore proposed that the existing research pertaining to Japanese language learners and specifically male Japanese language learners, discussed below, be considered to the extent that it is relevant to my current teaching environment.

In her study of 1,234 ESL students from 9 different language backgrounds, Reid (1987, p.93) found that “Japanese learners were the least auditory of all learners”. She also found that every language group gave group work a negative preference. Reid (1987, p.98) pertinently noted: “If virtually none of the respondents chose group learning as a major learning preference... some reexamination of... teaching methods by... University teachers may be in order” Her findings also indicated that males preferred visual and tactile learning significantly more than females.

In an article challenging Liu’s (1998) proposition that Asian cultures are ones of ‘unconditional obedience’ where the teacher is a ‘fount of knowledge’, Littlewood (2000, p.33) asserts that, based on his research to the contrary:

“The students’ responses... indicate clearly that the stereotype of Asian students as ‘obedient listeners’—whether or not it is a reflection of their actual

behaviour in class—does not reflect the roles they *would like* to adopt in class”.

He concludes that students

“...want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers. Most of all, they want to do this together with their fellow students in an atmosphere which is friendly and supportive.” (Littlewood, 2000, p.34)

His results seem to suggest we should at least exercise some caution when assigning learning styles based on perceived cultural inclinations.

2.6 Current extent of implementation of a CLT approach

2.6.1. As implemented through ‘English Firsthand Success’

While there is certainly a focus on learners’ personal experiences in many activities, *English Firsthand Success* (Helgesen et al., 2006) fails to provide fully authentic materials. Although some of the activities focus on the learning process by way of role-plays and communication games, many of these are unduly restrictive and may not allow negotiation of meaning to the extent advocated by a truly communicative approach. There are also few, if any, ideas to practice the target language outside the classroom. As for the encouragement of risk-taking and tolerance of errors, the textbook’s ‘ensemble’ sections are perhaps the most promising avenues of opportunity in this regard. However, many students simply repeat pre-prepared questions or sentences, and the chance of risk is accordingly reduced.

Linguistic competence is addressed by way of the language check sections. Although, as Thompson (1996) suggests, learners are first exposed to new language in a comprehensible context, they perhaps rely too heavily on the teacher to provide the correct answers, rather than as he recommends, by discussing and working out the new forms with their peers. The activities provided by the text do little to address illocutionary or sociolinguistic competence, i.e. exercises relating to stress, intonation or levels of politeness. Discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency are potentially developed by the ‘ensemble’ group work activities. However, the same criticisms about lack of enough genuine chance for negotiation of meaning and lack of control over turn taking, etc. still apply.

2.6.2 As implemented through other channels

As stated previously (2.2), in my current teaching environment, teachers are under considerable pressure from the agency, the university and the students, to follow the set-text fairly rigorously. However, an attempt has been made to incorporate communicative principles (1.1) in the teaching environment where possible. Authentic texts have been adopted in preference to similar texts provided in the textbook. For example, where the textbook provided a map of a fictional town, the teacher provided a map of Shibuya, Tokyo. In another case, an English language song by a Japanese band (*Make a Wish*, by *Ellegarden*) was used in the classroom to introduce the idioms “make a move” and “nothing lasts forever” among other linguistic items. In other cases, such exploitation of authentic materials has not been possible, mainly because of the students’ elementary level and inability to comprehend fully authentic material.

Language activation outside the classroom (1.1.4) has also been encouraged, particularly by way of organized homestays in English speaking countries. As stated in 2.1, opportunities to engage with English language media do exist, and where possible students are encouraged to do so.

Finally, in terms of error correction, Williams (1995) model (1.1.6) has been adopted as opposed to the more traditional tolerance of error advocated in other CLT approaches.

3. Appropriateness and possibility of further implementation of a CLT approach

As Hedge (2000, p.44) states, “the ability to communicate effectively in English... is by no means the only possible goal (of studying it)”. It is necessary, therefore, to consider whether such a goal, as hankered for by a CLT approach, is appropriate in my current teaching environment.

3.1 In relation to students’ learning styles and culture

Insofar as all Japanese students can be considered to conform to the learning styles Reid’s (1987) results suggest (2.5), then perhaps a CLT approach is not the most appropriate choice. After all, a CLT approach advocates group work, and in Reid’s (1987) results Japanese students expressed a negative preference towards group work.

However, they were also the least auditory of all the language groups, which might suggest a teacher-centered explanatory monologue should be abandoned in favor of more cooperative, communicative learning.

Another pertinent factor brought to light by her study is that male students expressed a preference for visual and tactile learning. This is relevant because the student body in my teaching environment is comprised of 90% male students. The issue that must be considered is whether these learning styles are compatible with a CLT approach. Tactile learning includes such activities as making a model, doing a class project, drawing or building something. A visual learning style indicates a preference for reading instructions or notes from a blackboard or textbook. It seems that both tactile and visual learning styles could be simultaneously accommodated by CLT, in an activity such as one student reading instructions for a model and the other student constructing it. However, this would fail to constitute a communicative activity in the respect that freedom of materials is restricted. It might, however, be possible for the students to generate their own instructions for their own models.

Liu (1998) and Littlewood (2000) provide obviously conflicting views relating to learning styles associated with culture. If we accept Littlewood's (2000) findings, then a CLT approach would seem appropriate as a way to encourage students to work together and find answers for themselves. An inductive approach such as this is further supported by Thompson's (1996) model for learning grammar in a CLT classroom (1.1.6).

Sano et al (1984) conducted another study relating to cultural appropriateness of adopting a communicative approach. In their paper they acknowledge that the goal of communicative competence is perhaps not the most appropriate one for Japanese learners of English. They suggest a modified CLT approach whereby language activities "need not necessarily be aimed at use that is 'authentic', from the native speaker's point of view." (Sano et al., 1984, p.170) They offer a reconfigured notion of communicative ability, which could be adopted in my current teaching environment. It is to be encouraged "for the sake of its contribution to self expression and personal growth as well as (or rather than) for its practical usefulness in English-speaking societies" (Sano et al., 1984, p.170).

3.2 In relation to the affective filter

In relation to affective filters, Hedge (2000, p.22) notes that “the concept of the filter highlights the role of the teacher in creating beneficial conditions for language learning” and “the greatest anxiety seems to relate to negative experiences in speaking activities” (Hedge, 2000, p.21) The question would therefore appear to be whether CLT is the best approach to lower the affective filter. It might be suggested that it could in fact exacerbate the affective filter. Speaking activities, although not the only kind of activity in CLT, certainly figure prominently. Situations involving learners speaking in front of their peers are virtually unavoidable in any CLT approach, although limiting group activity in favor of pair work might go some way to reduce performance anxiety. The reduction of group work also seems to be one of the logical conclusions drawn from Reid’s (1987) research (2.5). However, such a decrease might have the undesirable effect of eliminating opportunities for the development of discourse competence, the perceived necessity of which has been discussed above (1.2).

3.3 In relation to student motivation

From the findings in the student motivation survey (Table 1, 2.3), it is possible to surmise that acquiring the ability of ‘communication’ is the most important goal for a large percentage of the student population. This implies that a CLT approach would be suitable. However, the instrumental motivation of learning to read English for study purposes also ranks highly, as does reading and listening to English media for information or pleasure.

It should be noted that these latter two areas of motivation focus on receptive language skills, rather than productive. Notwithstanding this fact, in her article on the role of CLT, Savignon (1991, p.261) reminds us that “listeners and readers are no longer regarded as passive. They are seen as active participants in the negotiation of meaning.” This implies that CLT is also an appropriate approach for the development of reading and listening skills, and is not just concerned with oral production. This view is shared by Thompson (1996, p.12), who contemplates “Perhaps, rather than student talking time, we should be thinking about the broader concept of student communicating time (which includes)... periods of silent reflection undistracted by talk from teacher or partner”.

3.4 In relation to Ellis’s ‘informal’ model

It could well be appropriate to adopt Ellis's (1982) 'informal' teaching approach in my current teaching environment, but restrictions such as student numbers and institutional constraints reduce the possibility of doing so. Acting as an 'onlooker' or 'partner' is rendered impractical by large student numbers. On the other hand, it would be possible to adopt his suggestions for error-correction to a certain extent, but this would be tempered by the acceptance of Williams's (1995) conclusions on the matter (1.1.6)

Some of the activities in the textbook go some way to meeting his five conditions (1.3) for communicative activities. In one such example, students are directed to interview each other to obtain personal information, such as birthday, hometown, favorite food, and 'something interesting' about them. Ellis (1982, p.76) states, in relation to a picture dictation activity, which meets his five conditions:

“... the focus is on the message throughout, there is an obvious information-gap, negotiation will be required whenever the describer's message is not clear or the drawer fails to understand, and the learners will need to call on a wide range of communicative resources”.

The interview could arguably also satisfy this description, particularly in relation to negotiation of meaning regarding 'something interesting about you' which has a variety of interpretations including 'different', 'unique', 'strange' or 'unusual', but does definitely not mean 'something you are interested in' as some students mistakenly interpreted.

3.5 In relation to communicative competence

Developing linguistic competence might not necessarily entail a return to traditional grammar instruction, but a more progressive and intuitive method such as that proposed by Thompson (1996). Mastering pragmatic competence requires an understanding of stress, intonation and the scale of formality. The correct use of discourse markers in conversation and cohesive devices in reading and writing will be required to develop discourse competence. An understanding of communication strategies is required for learners to acquire strategic competence. The development of fluency may require a high proportion of negotiated meaning through information gap activities.

The main question in this respect is: What kinds of classroom activity can be used to

develop the different communicative competencies? Some have advocated a task-based approach that entails the use of activities in which “meaning is primary, there is a problem to solve and relationship to real-world activities, with an objective that can be assessed in terms of an outcome” (Skehan, 1998, p.95, cited in Brown, 2007, p.242).

If Skehan’s (1998) conception of a ‘communicative task’ is accepted, then we might suggest that some of the activities in the textbook are appropriate. In one such activity, students are asked to locate places on a shared map by asking for and providing directions to each other. It might be argued that meaning is primary in the respect that the grammatically flawed ‘go to straight’ will still be capable of inciting the listener to proceed in a straight line, and concerns relating to linguistic form are thus temporarily suspended. The problem to solve is that of navigating from point A to point B, and there is clearly a relationship to real-world activities. The objective that can be assessed in terms of an outcome is whether the listener successfully locates point B by way of the speaker’s directions.

Other activities in the text do not conform so neatly to this formula, but might be successfully adapted to do so. Furthermore, opportunities to focus on pragmatic, discourse and strategic competence might be injected into the text, or included in independently devised activities. In relation to the map example discussed above, one might attempt to develop pragmatic competence by asking for directions according to different levels of politeness, from very polite, “Excuse me, do you think you could possibly tell me how to get to the library?”, to casual “D’ya know where the library is, mate?”. Common discourse markers such as “you know”, “actually”, and “basically” might also be included, for example “You know, I’m sorry, I don’t”, or “Actually, I’m not from around here” or “Basically, go straight down this street.” On previous occasions, opportunities to encourage the development of strategic competence in this activity have also become apparent. In the phrase “Go three blocks, then turn left” students have often been confused as to whether the first block, next to which the students’ avatar is located, should be included in the count of three blocks. Clarification language and rephrasing such as “Three blocks including this one?” thus becomes necessary.

4. Conclusion

In this report, I have presented arguments both for and against further adopting a

communicative approach in my current teaching environment. Some of the points discussed are purely academic, given the institutional constraints relating to teaching approach and use of materials. In other ways, there is apparent flexibility, and I have shown how the textbook activities might be manipulated to increase their communicative validity.

I would like to summarize with a quote from Abbott (1981, p.229), which reflects my views on teaching, and my opinion as to the extent to which a CLT approach should be adopted:

“To hope that our pupils will learn English simply by being encouraged to communicate is, I suggest, to mistake ends for means. What is fallacious nowadays is the assumption that the new communicative techniques displace the older manipulative ones. Both sorts are needed.”

I also concur with Brown (2007, p.11) who states that

“As ‘enlightened’ teachers, we can think in terms of a number of possible methodological – or shall we say, pedagogical – options at our disposal for tailoring classes to particular contexts. Our approach – or theory of language and language learning – therefore takes on great importance”

Any adoption of a CLT approach should be piecemeal, not absolute. Although CLT itself aims to be an amalgam of the best parts of previous methods, it too must be subject to selective use in any classroom environment.

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