Communicative language teaching in the 21st century:
The ‘principled communicative approach’

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Introduction
• “Communicative language teaching” (CLT) has become a real buzzword in language teaching methodology, but it covers a very wide range of variants that are only loosely related to each other.
  • So, what is ‘communicative language teaching’?

What is CLT?
• CLT first appeared in the 1970s to promote the teaching of active and meaningful communicative skills – i.e. communicative competence – “through learner participation in communicative events” (Savignon, 1990, p. 210).

Key features of CLT
• Activities promote real communication, that is, engage learners in the authentic, functional use of language.
• Classroom communicative situations should resemble real-life communication as much as possible.
  • Fluency is more important than accuracy.

Key features of CLT
• Typical communicative activities:
  • role-plays
  • discussions
  • problem-solving tasks
  • simulations
  • projects
  • games

Problem with CLT
• The communicative reform only focused on the linguistic course content by drawing on:
  • Austin and Searle’s speech act theory
  • Hymes’ model of communicative competence and its application to L2 proficiency by Canale and Swain (1980; Canale 1983)
  • Halliday’s systemic functional grammar
Problem with CLT

- The only learning-specific principle is the broad tenet of ‘learning through doing’.
- Communicative competence develops automatically through their active participation in ‘seeking situational meaning’.
- Thus, CLT did not properly address the psychology of learning.

Problem with CLT

- Vagueness of ‘seeking situational meaning’ → diverse varieties of CLT around the world
- Well-known example: contradictory stances with respect to the teaching of grammar
- In sum: “There is no single text or authority on it [CLT], nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 155).

Explicit vs. Implicit learning

- Explicit learning: The learner’s conscious and deliberate attempt to master some material or solve a problem. This is the learning type emphasised by most school instruction.
- Implicit learning: Acquiring skills and knowledge without conscious awareness, that is, automatically and with no conscious attempt to learn them.

The explicit–implicit dilemma

- academic learning is based on explicit learning ↔ children’s mastery of their L1 involves implicit learning
- Key question: Should we model L2 learning after the implicit L1 acquisition process?

Problem!

- Implicit learning does not seem to work efficiently for the mastery of an L2.
- This ineffectiveness makes it necessary to draw on the additional resources of various explicit learning procedures.

Interim conclusion

- The main challenge of modern language instruction is find ways to maximise the cooperation of explicit and implicit learning.
Interim conclusion

- Three key areas in the explicit-implicit cooperation:
  (a) focus on form and form-focused instruction
  (b) fluency and automatization
  (c) formulaic language

Focus on form (FonF) and form-focused instruction (FFI)

- FonF/FFI: concern with the structural system of language from a communicative perspective.
- A new type of grammar instruction embedded within a meaning-based communicative approach.

Main types of FonF/FFI

- Main types of FonF/FFI (Rod Ellis 2008):
  - Input-based options (e.g. input flooding)
  - Explicit options (e.g. inductive instruction)
  - Production options (e.g. inducing learners to produce utterances containing the target structure)
  - Corrective feedback (e.g. recasts or explicit correction)

Fluency and automatization

- In psychology, fluency is discussed under the broader concept of ‘automaticity/automatization’.
- Promotion of fluency: usually subsumed under ‘skill learning theory’.
- From a psychological point of view the relevant issue to explore: How can L2 skills be automatized?

Skill learning theory

- Automatization requires
  - procedural knowledge (i.e. implicit knowledge), which in turn requires
    - initial declarative input (i.e. explicit input) +
    - conscious consecutive practice, which can be further divided into
      - controlled practice
      - open-ended practice

- declarative input → controlled practice → open-ended practice

reminiscent of the well-known methodological progression:

presentation → practice → production (PPP).
Three phases of skill learning

1. **Declarative input stage:**
   Providing clear and concise rules and sufficient examples to raise awareness of the skill.

2. **Controlled practice:**
   Opportunities for abundant repetition within a narrow context – i.e. drilling – to internalise ('proceduralise') the skill.

3. **Open-ended practice:**
   Continuous improvement in a well-established skill in a wider and wider applicability range.

Formulaic language

- There is something fundamental about formulaic language (such as lexical phrases, idioms, conventionalised expressions, collocations, etc.)

Formulaic language

- Henry Widdowson: “communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules ... It is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks.”

- John Sinclair: “The overwhelming nature of this evidence leads us to elevate the principle of idiom from being a rather minor feature, compared with grammar, to being at least as important as grammar in the explanation of how meaning arises in text.”

Formulaic language

- Formulaic language competence is directly linked to automatized, fluent language production:
  - *formulaic sequences* are stored in the memory as single units →
  - their retrieval is cognitively relatively undemanding →
  - the speaker can attend to other aspects of communication, plan larger pieces of discourse →
  - fluent language production under real-time conditions

Teaching formulaic language

- Little past research on how to teach formulaic language.
‘ACCESS’

- the most systematic attempt to develop a coherent approach for the promotion of formulaic sequences
- it offers a principled adaptation of CLT to generate fluency by drawing on the theories of:
  - automatization
  - formulaic language

Summary

Seven main principles of the ‘principled communicative approach’ (PCA)

1. The personal significance principle

PCA should be meaning-focused and personally significant as a whole.

2. The controlled practice principle

Skill learning theory suggests that PCA should also include controlled practice activities to promote the automatization of L2 skills.

3. The declarative input principle

To facilitate automatization, PCA should involve explicit initial input components that are then ‘proceduralised’ through practice.

4. The focus on form principle

While maintaining an overall meaning-oriented approach, PCA should also pay attention to the formal/structural aspects of the L2 that determine accuracy and appropriateness at the linguistic, discourse and pragmatic levels.
5. The formulaic language principle

PCA should include the teaching of **formulaic language** as a featured component.

6. The language exposure principle

PCA should offer learners extensive exposure to **large amounts of L2 input** that can feed the learners’ implicit learning mechanisms.

In order to make the most of this exposure, learners should be given some explicit preparation in terms of pre-task activities, to prime them for maximum intake.

7. The focused interaction principle

PCP should offer learners ample opportunities to participate in genuine **L2 interaction**.

For best effect, such communicative practice should always have a specific **formal or functional focus**, and should be associated with target phrases to practice.

Thank you for your attention!