

# **Key principles of effective teaching and learning within a communicative framework**

**Owen John Crowe**  
**Osaka Shoin Women's University**

## **Introduction**

Of the plethora of teaching methodologies, approaches, and principles of teaching that exist and have held sway at various times, it is now the more communicative approaches that have taken hold and become more widely accepted. As an umbrella term, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach that encompasses a number of models, research paradigms and theories, all of which hold that the main purpose of language use is communication. To this end, the primary goal of this approach is to develop communicative ability through the use of tasks and simulations of real-life situations that require communication and engage a combination of the skills of speaking and listening, reading and writing. Accordingly, this paper will argue that the use of tasks as an organising principle, a focus on form within these tasks, the principle of cooperative and collaborative learning, and the provision for comprehensible and meaningful input, are essential elements in lesson plans and the effective teaching and learning of language.

## **Main Aims of Communicative Language Teaching**

This paper will first look at the main aims of CLT in general terms, before turning to an examination of its essential elements and a justification of their use. The place of grammar instruction in a focus-on-form approach and its employment of tasks will then be detailed, followed by the principle of comprehensible and meaningful input and its related corollary of cooperative and collaborative learning. It will be shown that these concepts are essential elements in the effective teaching and learning of language and the development of all the macro-skills of listening and speaking, reading and writing.

### **An Examination of CLT's Essential Elements**

The primary goal of CLT is to develop communicative competence, which is defined as the ability to make use of appropriate social behaviours and involves active use of the target language by the learner (Hymes, 1971). CLT is not however a single prescriptive method, but rather draws on theories from the areas of cognitive science, educational psychology, and second language acquisition (Brandl, 2008). Despite this, a recognition that activities require interaction between learners, that they use authentic and real-world contexts that may engage any of the skills of speaking, listening, reading, or writing, and that they be learner-centred have been outlined as characteristics required by the CLT approach (Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

#### **Grammar instruction in a focus-on-form approach**

The role that grammar instruction plays in such a communicative framework, and in particular whether to make grammar instruction explicit or implicit, has also been the source of a long-running debate. Explicit grammar instruction means the rules are explained by the teacher or teaching materials such that they become salient to the learner. In cases of implicit grammar instruction, it is expected the learners will figure out the rules for themselves after repeated exposure to the language and its particular forms. While there is still disagreement, there is ample evidence that making the rules of grammar explicit to adult learners is of benefit (Norris & Ortega, 2000). There is however still one more distinction to be drawn between explicit ways of teaching grammar. As Long (1991) has conceived, the 'focus-on-formS' approach represents the explicit and more traditional method of instruction where much time was spent on isolated forms of the language, with meaning often ignored, introduced in an order externally imposed by the syllabus. In contrast to this, the explicit 'focus-on-form' approach to grammar teaching makes use of communicative tasks with clear contexts to teach grammar and help learners make form-meaning connections. Doughty and Long (2003) point out the overwhelming body of empirical evidence in support of a focus-on-form approach and hence proclaim it to be a fundamental methodological principle of CLT and task-based learning – a strong claim that certainly must justify its inclusion in any lesson plan or design.

### **The employment of tasks**

Another key principle of CLT is that learning activities use tasks as an organisational principle. While traditional methods have used grammar, vocabulary, or texts as a basis for syllabus organisation, the CLT approach gives priority to communicative skills with grammar being introduced only when it is needed to support the development of these skills. In light of this, tasks are seen as central units in forming the basis for both daily and long-term lesson plans (Breen, 1987; Long, 1985; Nunan, 1989). The rationale for using communicative tasks in this way is based on contemporary theories of language learning, which hold that the driving force of language development is communicative language use (Prabhu, 1987). A task has a clear goal that requires learners to engage in social interaction, share information, negotiate meaning, and make use of and modify their interlanguage, which in turn promotes acquisition. Tasks provide learners with a purpose and meaningful context in which to use the grammar and language they have studied, and thus tasks play a pivotal role in the learning process and development of all language macro-skills (Brandl, 2008).

This central importance calls into question exactly what is meant by the term “task”. There are numerous and competing definitions of the term, but they each share a number of common features. Long (1985) and Skehan (1998) both emphasise the use of real-world tasks asserting that they necessitate the employment of real language in accomplishing them. The importance of a focus on meaning, as opposed to explicitly focusing on forms, is also a common feature and supports the idea that conveying meaning is the essence of language use. Nunan (1989) also notes that task performance often necessitates the concurrent use of more than one macro-skill, in contrast to more traditional methods where macro-skills had been addressed separately and practised in isolation.

**Real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks.** Because of the often complex nature of tasks and the pedagogical needs of students Nunan (1993) also makes a distinction between two varieties of task: real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks. The former are more complex and designed to help learners develop the skills

they will need to use in the real world. This is often done through the simulation of authentic task behaviour and the attainment of some goal or end product. This kind of task usually constitutes the final goal of a lesson. In contrast to this, simpler pedagogical tasks are used to assist or prepare learners and act as a bridge towards this final goal (Long, 1989). Pedagogical tasks are designed to facilitate the language acquisition process by taking into account the learners' skill level, the social context of second language learning, and the teaching goal. These kinds of tasks have an enabling character – in that they are simpler and designed to build-up to the main task – often focus on just one of the skills of listening, speaking, reading, or writing in isolation, and do not reflect real-world tasks. The rationale here is that by focusing the students' attention on particular aspects and forms of the target language and engaging the skills they will need for the subsequent task, they will be better able to make use of and apply these skills in combination to achieve the final objective of the lesson (Brandl, 2008).

### **Comprehensible and meaningful input**

A third principle that particularly relates to the macro-skill of listening, is that for effective learning to take place the information processed must be meaningful. This is one of the fundamental tenets of CLT and a counter-reaction to methods that emphasised the repetitive drilling of forms and decontextualised content that had no meaning or made no sense to the learners. As Ausubel (1963) noted, information presented to learners must be clearly relatable to existing prior knowledge so that it can be assimilated into the learner's cognitive structure. If this condition is not met, then successful learning is much less likely to occur. A further requirement in the field of language learning is that for the information heard to be meaningful, it must also be comprehensible. Lee and VanPatten (1995) state in relation to this that learners must understand most of the language they are exposed to if they are to attach meaning to the language and real acquisition is to take place. New features of language, whether they be vocabulary, grammar, or some other aspect, can only be assimilated into the learner's mental representation of the language system if they have been associated with some real-world meaning. The conditions of comprehensibility and meaningfulness are essential if these form-

meaning connections are to be made in the learner's mind, and thus these principles must be considered when designing lessons that are to be effective and promote learning. The teacher must be mindful of the learners' needs and take into account the task choice and associated difficulty, the learner processing skills likely to be engaged, and scaffolding strategies that might be used to help achieve these ends.

### **Cooperative and collaborative learning**

Another essential element of any learner-centred approach is the principle of cooperative and collaborative learning, which by definition will engage the skills of speaking and listening. This principle has long been recognised as a major facilitator and promoter of learning (Kagan, 1989). Such an approach advocates a setting in which classrooms and activities are organised in a way that allows students to work together in small groups or pairs to complete a task. In second language learning classrooms, this means students work together to achieve the goal of the language-learning task through active and communicative use of the target language. Numerous benefits are seen when learning tasks are designed to require communicative interaction amongst students (Brandl, 2008). Consequently, interaction requires both input and production on the part of the learners – they cannot simply be passive receivers as may have been the case in more traditional, teacher-centred classrooms. Learners are required to be active participants who interact with each other and negotiate the input they receive, while at the same time modifying their output in an effort to negotiate meaning with their interlocutors. This kind of interaction acts as a catalyst to the language acquisition process and is often cited as the “Interaction Hypothesis” (Long, 1996). This claim is also supported by studies which have investigated the link between task-based interaction and language acquisition (Keck, Iberri-Shea, Tracy-Ventura & Wa-Mbaleka, 2006). Keck et al.'s (2006) study presents a large body of evidence in support of tasks that push learners to produce more output and require the communicative exchange of information during learner-to-learner interaction. While this cooperative principle emphasises the role of interaction and collaboration between learners, it does not preclude the need for teacher-learner interaction – the main focus of more traditional means of instruction. The importance of social interaction between the teacher and the learner

has been well described by Vygotsky (1978). This kind of interaction allows the learner to exceed their current level of development and reach a higher potential through the assistance of the teacher. The difference here is that as soon as learners are able to perform the language tasks on their own, the focus shifts from teacher-led to learner-centred language application in communicative language classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has presented a number of principles that make up indispensable parts of the CLT method. First, the importance of a focus-on-form approach (as opposed to a focus-on-formS approach) within such a task-based, communicative method has been detailed. The salient features of tasks in this paradigm have also been explored. Particular emphasis has been paid to their authentic real-world qualities, their focus-on-meaning and communicative aims, and their complex nature, which may engage any of the skills of speaking, listening, reading, or writing, or indeed a combination of these skills at one time. The two main categories of task – pedagogical and real-world, have also been noted along with their roles in providing learners with the necessary support to achieve the final lesson objective. The importance of meaningful and comprehensible language input and its effect on listening have also been considered in relation to lesson design and task planning. Finally, another central element of task-based lessons that hope to develop speaking and listening ability, that of cooperative and collaborative learning, has been shown to be supported by both theory and empirical evidence. It has been argued that these principles are of vital importance to lesson plans that hope to adopt a communicative approach, and therefore, that any lesson which does not make appropriate use of these principles will be less effective in achieving and promoting real learning.

## References

- Ausubel, D. (1963). *The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Breen, M. P. (1987). Contemporary paradigms in syllabus design, part I. *Language Teaching*, 20(2), 81-91.
- Brandl, K. (2008). *Communicative Language Teaching in action: Putting principles to work*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Doughty, C. J., & Long, M. H. (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hymes, D. (1971). Competence and performance in linguistic theory. In R. Huxley & E. Ingram (Eds.), *Language Acquisition and Methods* (pp. 3 – 28). New York: Academic Press.
- Kagan, S. (1989). *Cooperative learning resources for teachers*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Resources for Teachers
- Keck, C., Iberri-Shea, G., Tracy-Ventura, N., & Wa-Mbaleka, S. (2006). Investigating the empirical link between task-based interaction and acquisition: A meta-analysis. In J. M. Norris & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Synthesizing Research on Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 91 – 131). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Lee, J. F. and VanPatten, B. (1995). *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Long, M. H. (1985). A role for instruction in second language acquisition: task-based language teaching. In K. Hyltenstam & M. Pienemann (Eds.), *Modelling and*

*Assessing Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 77 – 99). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Long, M. H. (1989). Task, group, and task-group interaction. *University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL*, 8(2), 1-26.

Long, M. H. (1991). “Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology”. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 39 – 52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Long, M. H. (1996). “The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition”. In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 413 – 468). San Diego: Academic Press.

Norris, J. M., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50, 417-528.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1993). Task-based syllabus design: selecting, grading and sequencing tasks. In G. Crookes & S. M. Gass (Eds.), *Tasks in a Pedagogical Context* (pp. 55 – 66). Cleveland, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skehan, P. (1998). *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.



Wesche, M. B. & P. Skehan (2002). Communicative, task-based, and content-based instruction. In R.B. Kaplan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 207 – 228). New York: Oxford University Press.