

IMPLEMENTING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING METHOD IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become a widely accepted methodology for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) over the past few decades. However, the practical implementation of CLT presents several challenges in many classroom contexts. This paper discusses the key principles of CLT and addresses common obstacles faced by ESL teachers when adopting this approach. It provides suggestions for overcoming challenges related to transitioning from teacher-centered to learner-centered practices, developing authentic learning materials, establishing a low-anxiety environment, conducting formative assessment, and managing large class sizes. The paper argues that with proper understanding, planning and context-specific adaptations, CLT can be effectively implemented to develop students' communicative competence despite resource constraints.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, ESL, implementation challenges, learner-centered approach, authentic materials, formative assessment, class size

INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has increasingly become a popular approach for teaching English as a second or foreign language over the past few decades (Savignon, 2018). Its main focus is on developing learners' communicative competence through engaging them in meaningful communication rather than just mastering grammatical rules (Littlewood, 1981). However, moving from the more traditional teacher-centered methods to a truly learner-centered CLT model presents challenges for many English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in real-world classrooms. While CLT has strong theoretical underpinnings, pragmatic barriers often hamper its effective implementation (Basturkmen, 2010). This paper aims to discuss key CLT principles and address common obstacles faced by ESL teachers when adopting this methodology through practical suggestions.

Shift from Teacher-Centered to Learner-Centered Approach

One of the core shifts CLT necessitates is moving from teacher-centered instruction, where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge, to a learner-centered

model that places students at the center of the learning process (Littlewood, 1981). However, making this transition can be difficult for novice ESL teachers used to the traditional method of lectures and drills (Brown, 2007). Teachers may find letting go of control over the class uncomfortable initially (Brown, 2007). To ease into the new role, teachers can start with short learner-centered tasks combined with teacher explanations (Brown, 2007). Gradually increasing communicative activities over time while providing occasional feedback can help teachers feel more confident as facilitators (Holme, 2014). Peer observations and group discussions also provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect upon and refine their evolving practices (Holme, 2014). With experience and support, most teachers are able to successfully adopt the learner-centered paradigm.

Developing Authentic Learning Materials

Use of authentic, real-world materials is essential in CLT classrooms to expose learners to natural language use in meaningful contexts (Breen & Candlin, 1980). However, finding readily available, appropriate materials can be a challenge especially in under-resourced environments (Nunan, 1988). Teachers need not spend excessive time creating everything from scratch but can collaborate to share materials online (Brandl, 2008). They can encourage students to participate by collecting newspaper articles, podcasts or videos relevant to topics (Nunan, 1988). Open-access online resources provide opportunities to access authentic texts, images, audio and videos with minimal effort (Brandl, 2008). While some adaptation may be required based on students' proficiency levels, technology helps address the scarcity of materials issue to a considerable extent.

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Affective factors like low motivation, lack of confidence and student anxiety significantly impact second language learning through CLT approaches (Krashen, 1982). Teachers play a key role in fostering a supportive environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks (Krashen, 1982). Strategies like mixed-ability grouping, integrating ice-breaker activities, and praising effort positively impact student participation and willingness to communicate (Brown, 2007). Taking time to understand sources of stress or shyness for particular students allows teachers to address issues through individual attention, if needed (Brown, 2007). Creating psychological safety encourages learners to actively engage in the target language.

Formative over Summative Assessment

CLT calls for a shift in assessment practices from testing memorized knowledge to formatively evaluating students' communicative abilities (Savignon, 2018). Observation-based feedback on students' performance in pair/group work helps identify their strengths and development areas (Littlewood, 2014). Discussions,

presentations, journals or portfolios are some alternatives to high-pressure tests (Nunan, 1988). Participation, effort and improvement over time should be assessment priorities rather than sole focus on grammatical accuracy (Savignon, 2018). Students also need guidance to engage in thoughtful self- and peer-evaluation for language development (Savignon, 2018). When used appropriately, varied assessment strategies provide meaningful insights into learning progress.

Addressing Large Class Sizes

Managing large student numbers can pose difficulties in carrying out communicative classroom activities essential for CLT (Harmer, 2007). One strategy is designating learner “facilitators” to lead small groups so the teacher can focus on whole-class monitoring (Fung & Chow, 2002). Teachers may also rotate students into different temporary groups regularly to allow interaction with diverse peers (Harmer, 2007). Carefully selecting activities that engage many students at once, like information-gap or problem-solving tasks, makes best use of limited class time with large numbers (Harmer, 2007). Technology integration through online discussion forums further extends participation spaces beyond physical classroom boundaries (Fung & Chow, 2002). With careful planning, class size need not impede CLT implementation. In general, we should focus on the following steps to apply CLT method efficiently in English language classrooms:

- Focus on developing all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) through communication activities rather than isolated skill teaching. For example, have students do role plays or debates to practice speaking while also listening.
- Incorporate pair and group work into every lesson to maximize learner interaction. Ensure there are clear instructions and students know their roles/tasks. Circulate to provide feedback.
- Use authentic prompts and open-ended questions to encourage creative, extended responses from students rather than just questioning for short answers.
- Integrate culture learning by having students discuss topics related to varied cultures/countries. This builds intercultural competence.
- Encourage risk-taking by affirming attempts to communicate rather than focusing on perfect grammar. Gently correcting errors helps students improve.
- Give students choices and voice in topic selection or activity roles to boost engagement and autonomy. Solicit feedback on lesson plans.
- Draw on students’ real-life experiences through sharing activities to make learning personally relevant.
- Use multi-modal materials like video/songs to cater to different learning styles and attract student interest.

- Train teaching assistants to effectively lead group discussions/activities if class size is large to maintain interaction levels.
- Get administrative support for issues like large classes or resources to overcome barriers beyond teacher control.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed some key obstacles encountered by ESL teachers in operationalizing CLT methodologies and offered practical suggestions derived from both theory and experience to address them. While transitioning to this learner-centered approach requires adjustment, creating optimal conditions for meaningful communication and language use through customized strategies can help overcome structural and non-structural barriers. With systematic efforts to understand CLT principles, build teacher capacity, and make contextual adaptations, this framework holds immense potential for developing English learners' communicative competence in varied educational settings.

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