

The Communicative Language Teaching Approach to English Teaching in the Japanese University Classroom

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Abstract

This paper describes the theory behind the Communicative Language Teaching approach to English language instruction, as well as focusing on the more practical aspects of its application in the Japanese university classroom. This paper will firstly define what is meant by Communicative Language Teaching and explain how it differs from other approaches in the field of English language instruction. Secondly, this paper will attempt to explain how this approach can be practically applied, with particular reference to the Japanese university classroom.

This paper is concerned with a particular area of English language instruction that has gained currency in the field of applied linguistics over the past thirty years: that of Communicative Language Teaching. Since its inception in the 1970s, this particular approach to English language teaching has slowly usurped the positions of several alternative methodologies and gained widespread popularity amongst the English teaching community. Personally, I have developed an interest in this area over the past few years while teaching English language at a number of Japanese schools and universities. As a brief note on my background, I am currently employed as a contracted foreign language teacher at Bukkyo University

in Kyoto. Prior to this post, I taught English at several other universities in the Kansai region, in particular concentrating on communication classes through content-based materials. Before my foray into higher education, I accrued a number of years experience of teaching at a Junior High School as part of the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program as well as stints at several private English schools. Through these various posts, I have nurtured an interest in the propagation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an effective tool in teaching English to Japanese students. I am also of the belief that CLT can help students to feel a greater awareness of the relevance of English in this increasingly globalized age, while also giving them more confidence in their ability to acquire and produce English in an effective manner. This paper will attempt to describe what is meant by Communicative Language Teaching as well as dwell on certain practical aspects of this approach. Furthermore, in this paper I will endeavor to clearly lay out my ideas and opinions with respect to this approach, based not only on my own experiences, but also on my readings of those who have been so influential in the development of this field in applied linguistics. Therefore, this paper will be broadly divided into two separate but not mutually exclusive areas. First, I will attempt to define what is actually meant by a communicative language teaching approach and how it can be applied in theory to the classroom. Second, I will introduce the more specific and practical aspects of classroom management, focusing on the Japanese university classroom. Moreover, attention will be paid to such issues as the responsibility of the student in a learner-centered environment, the role of the teacher in facilitating such learning, and the preemption of problems that may arise in the communication classroom. Although I will attempt to tackle each of these two broad areas separately, it should be understood that a certain amount of overlap is inevitable.

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to English is an umbrella term used to describe methodologies that make communicative competence the goal of the students' learning. This paragraph will set out some of the salient features of this approach as well as how it can be applied in theory to the language classroom. Thornbury indicates that the emergence of CLT in the 1970s was as a result of "the belief that communicative competence consists of more than simply the knowledge of the rules of grammar" (22). Lightbrown and Spada further postulate that language learning is not only the study of structures and forms "but also the functions and purposes that a language serves in different communicative settings" (196). To put this in a little perspective, throughout their junior high school and high school years, many students would have been exposed to teacher-fronted classrooms where the emphasis was clearly placed on non-communicative activities, the mastery of grammatical forms and a high degree of linguistic accuracy. It was quite clear to many who yearned for a more effective methodology in the teaching of English language that a separation had occurred between the language and its role in communication: English was seen not so much as a tool for communication but rather a means to test memory, solve problems and comprehend often uninteresting and unauthentic texts. While this methodology may adequately fulfill certain educational and societal needs in itself, it may also appear to those who care about the education of foreign languages as a regrettable waste of precious time and resources. It is frankly no wonder then, as Lightbrown and Spada note, that "...the motivation of learners is often stifled by an insistence on correctness in the earliest stages of second language learning" (140) and it is fairly clear to many teachers that students often approach tertiary-level English classes less than enthusiastically. It is for this reason that I am a supporter of the communicative approach in that students can come to the realization that English can not

only be enjoyable, but that it can also play a relevant role in their lives and even help them to an enhanced global outlook. But how does one reverse the six years of a grammar-translation emphasis on English study and reinvigorate the learning process? To do this in a communication classroom it is at first necessary to take the emphasis away from teacher-fronted classrooms and encourage students to actively use English as a tool of real communication. This in no way indicates an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; on the contrary, it can actually require a lot of work in certain areas outlined by Hedge, such as “setting up activities, organizing material resources, guiding students in groupwork, monitoring activities, and diagnosing the further needs of students”(63). In the use of pairwork and groupwork to conduct communicative activities such as surveys, role plays and so on, the students are engaged in real communication with meaningful goals and outcomes. Such communicative activities should ideally include information gap, some degree of choice, and appropriate feedback. The emphasis on students exchanging information reinforces the point that English should be used for meaningful communication. Choice then empowers the students to make decisions in English and feedback provides instant affirmation that communication has indeed taken place. It requires a lot of effort by the teacher to organize such activities prior to the lesson and a good deal of concentration during the lesson to monitor the ongoing activities. Furthermore, the teacher in a communication class should be more concerned with fluency, rather than accuracy: in other words, as Hedge put it, “the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness, or undue hesitation” (54). Indeed, it is widely assumed to be unproductive to overemphasize accuracy during communicative activities as according to Harmer, pointing out mistakes “interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form or precise

meaning” (105). After all, if the true value of a language is communication, as long as this is occurring then it may be unwise of the teacher to lay undue emphasis on accuracy. To further crystallize the aims of Communicative Language Teaching in English teaching, Nunan itemized five features of such an approach in 1991, and these were as follows:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.
4. An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

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These five ‘general principles’ are considered solid guidelines to the teaching of communicative English and I would like to expand on each of them. First of all, interaction in the classroom is of great importance to the encouragement of communicating in English. After all, what is communication if it doesn’t involve the interaction of at least two people? Whereas the level of difficulty will have to be adjusted accordingly, the students should at all times be encouraged to use the target language when interacting in order to improve their communicative ability and competence. As Larsen-Freeman points out, “The target language is a vehicle for classroom communication, not just the object of study” (125). This includes not only the students’ language, but that of the teacher too. While “judicious use of the students’ native language is permitted in (this

approach to teaching)” (Larsen-Freeman 132), all efforts should be made to use English in even the setting up and explanation of activities. After all, if the students know they can expect a translation to follow, there is a high possibility that they will ‘switch off’ when the teacher is giving out instructions in English and hence a valuable chance to listen to ‘real’ English is wasted. It is therefore worthwhile keeping the students’ native language to a minimum even in lower-level classes where it may be deemed necessary to grade teacher talk, employ more gestures and liberally use examples to communicate points. It is also true that many students initially feel self-conscious when speaking English, and that time, patience and gentle persistence are required over the first few lessons to allow the students to feel more comfortable in this novel learning environment. After all, many of them will not have had the chance to use English before in such a setting and hence may initially lack confidence. It is therefore a primary role of the teacher to act as facilitator and smooth the way as much as possible to encourage interaction in the target language. Secondly, Nunan encourages the use of authentic texts in the classroom, and this is a matter that has attracted some interesting debate in recent years. Gilmore (2007) highlights the difficulty in actually defining what we mean by the term ‘authentic’ text, pointing out that such English as “graded teacher talk, motherese...scripted television soap operas” (98) could all be classed as authentic English. He suggests that authenticity should thus be thought of more as that which can “produce learners who are able to communicate effectively in the target language of a particular speech community” (98). In other words, it is very much up to the judgment of the individual teacher and an assessment of their students’ needs that should help determine what and what isn’t authentic material in any certain classroom. I would suggest that as we are teaching university students of whom many have as yet ill-defined notions as to when or

where they may use English in the future, this gives the teacher plenty of scope to choose materials from a wide variety of themes and situations. While many textbooks may stutter into the more ‘contrived’ area of English text, it is important for language teachers to supplement or indeed substitute material that is adjudged to be at the more contrived end of the spectrum, and expose the students to the more authentic alternatives. Often, with lower-level classes it may be necessary to use what Hedge calls “semi-authentic” (246) texts at first while gradually introducing more authentic texts as communicative competence develops. This calls for the careful selection of textbooks and the judicious use of material within. The third principle of CLT outlined by Nunan encourages students to concentrate not only on the language but on the language process itself. This criterion is perhaps rather more problematic than the other four as it assumes a degree of learner-centeredness, indeed, almost learner-autonomy in the classroom. Nunan and Lamb freely admit that “we have been in relatively few situations in which learners from an early stage in the learning process have been able to make critically informed decisions about what to learn and how to learn” (11-12). Indeed, the very idea of students taking responsibility for their own learning may come across as rather challenging in large groups with often a variety of language levels and degrees of motivation. Nunan and Lamb do stress that learner-centeredness is not an absolute standard but a continuum along which autonomy of learning may be gently nudged as students become more familiar with the concept of taking charge of their own learning. Nunan and Lamb argue most effectively that it is a truism that ultimately, “if learners are to learn anything at all...they have to do the learning for themselves” (9). The fourth and fifth guidelines of communicative English teaching, according to Nunan, involve bringing the students’ prior knowledge into the classroom setting and linking the language in the classroom

to the outside world. The selection of materials is of importance here as it may be of greater effect to introduce texts that help to engage the students and draw out prior knowledge that the student can feel comfortable talking about. Students will undoubtedly feel more involved and stimulated if they are able to utilize personal experience and knowledge in the classroom. As for linking language activities with activities outside of the classroom, this may be a little limited in Japan, but such tools as the internet have broadened the opportunities for students in Japan to further practice real English outside the traditional framework of the classroom. One method that may be useful in this regard is the use of content-based textbooks that allow scope for individual research. Clarifying the aims of a class is particularly important if you employ a content-based communicative approach to English teaching. The aim of content-based learning is the study of English through the in-depth study of selected topics and the opportunities to learn the language and the learning process through these topics. This therefore helps to satisfy the general principle outlined by Nunan that language within the classroom should not exist in a vacuum but rather should be seen as connected to language outside the classroom. Some would argue it is a far more natural way of learning a language, and probably a far more interesting way too. Problems with grammatical structure and the introduction of new vocabulary are dealt with along the way, but the focus should always remain on the acquisition of communicative English as a tool to exchange information, solve problems, negotiate outcomes, and express feelings and opinions. In other words, using language as a means rather than as an end in itself. Such crucial areas as form and function can also be developed through this method. Furthermore, in the area of conversational English, Thornbury talks about genre knowledge, and distinguishes between what he calls a 'transactional function' and an 'interpersonal function'. The former deals with the more

predictable aspects of language that would occur in an English-speaking community: buying a train ticket, reserving a restaurant table over the telephone, listening to a weather forecast etc., whereas the purpose of the latter is to “establish and maintain social relations” (13), including small talk, general conversation and debate. Richards mentions important skills such as “casual conversation and conversational fluency” (84), suggesting the implementation of ‘turn-taking strategies’ and “appropriateness of language” in classroom activities. Equal emphasis should be placed on both transactional and interpersonal function activities in order to produce well-rounded communicators able to function confidently in a variety of situations. Every language teacher has surely come across students that are able to function quite well in set role plays and information gap activities, only to come across as stilted and awkward when making general conversation. Thus a focus on pragmatic English — nuance, humor, subtlety and so on - can go a long way in developing truly competent communicators. As for functional activities, in the CLT classroom, a set theme is the vehicle through which these skills are acquired, and students are therefore encouraged to bring their own prior knowledge into the classroom to add authenticity to proceedings. By valuing the students’ own experiences we bring real life situations into the classroom. To conclude, this paragraph has outlined the principles behind the approach to English teaching termed Communicative Language Teaching. By employing this approach and by using content-based texts, students feel better equipped to take control of their own learning. Students bring into the classroom an awful lot of prior ‘world knowledge’ as well as English knowledge and this has to be tapped, refreshed and utilized via realistic themes and activities. By adhering to Nunan’s five guidelines, we may endeavor to improve students’ ability to function effectively and competently in the English language.

The employment of CLT in the Japanese university classroom of course poses a number of challenges to the language teacher. Above all, the key to success in any communicative language context is effective classroom management. Classroom management can embrace a number of factors that will be tackled below, namely: the management of large class numbers; the problem of limited classroom space; the practical adoption of Nunan's guidelines to CLT mentioned in the first paragraph; the role of the teacher during the lesson; and the preemption of such student problems as an unwillingness to participate or use the target language in class. Let us consider the perennial problem of large classroom sizes in communication lessons. It is to be expected that the traditionally large class sizes for English language courses at university do represent an obstacle for the teacher wishing to engage the students in communicative activities. Such fundamental factors as class size, classroom size and external distractions can play an important role in the overall effectiveness of communication classes. Along with the sheer population density, bags, tennis rackets, umbrellas and assorted paraphernalia often clutter up the aisles and restrict the teacher's ability to move around the classroom and successfully monitor individual groups. Furthermore, classrooms next to busy main roads or other sources of external noise can be equally frustrating for the students and teacher alike. Of course, a lot of these problems are simply unavoidable and it is up to us as teachers to be resourceful and make the best of what is available. On the other hand, we can optimize classroom space and student management by increasing pairwork or groupwork within our classes. This will be further discussed in more detail below. In the situation where the teacher and the students have different native tongues, it is especially important that the structure and aims of the lesson are clear and understandable. The presence of a textbook or other material will

help, but it is also useful to hand out a curriculum at the beginning of a course and clearly state the goals of the course and the aims of the lesson at the beginning of each class. For the latter, it may be beneficial to write a plan in the top corner of the board at the beginning of the lesson as this helps to give students a framework within which they will probably feel more comfortable and secure. In addition to the problems of class numbers is the further inconvenience of often only meeting communication students once or possibly twice a week. In the interim, the students have an awful lot of time to forget the contents of the previous lesson and due to this, directed homework as well as reviews of previous material are crucial to refreshing students' memories. Where content-based themes are being taught, forming a bridge between lessons that are a week apart is often essential to maintaining focus and interest. Turning to the basic principles of CLT, it is of great importance that emphasis be placed on students interacting in English and the teacher instructing the students in the target language. During lessons, it is preferable to reduce teacher talking time as much as possible: it is axiomatic that the more time a teacher talks, the less time the students have to be on task. As Harmer points out, "If we talk all the time...the students are denied their own chance to practice production, or get exposure through other means" (66). Obviously, teachers do need to talk to the class to set up activities and provide feedback. Instructions can be enhanced by the use of graded talk appropriate to the level of the class, liberal employment of gestures, and 'modeling' an activity with a student to demonstrate to the class what is expected of them. A communicative approach to English teaching requires students to interact with one another, and an effective way for this to occur is in pairs, in small groups or by walking around and carrying out a survey with their classmates. As Scrivener suggests, "for each activity you do in class, consider: what grouping, seating, standing

arrangements are most appropriate?" (93). In my case, I often randomly 'mix up' classes into pairs or small groups for task work and there are good reasons for this. Primarily, it is the most practical and effective way for students to communicate in class: it gives the students an opportunity to use their English in small, intimate units where they may feel more confident and able to speak out. After all, it is rather more difficult to elicit English from students in front of a whole class and my own experience of attempting this in a plenary arrangement has often been frustrating and only worthwhile with the strongest and most confident language learners. As a consequence, activities that require traditional arrangements where students are all facing the front and responding to a teacher should be reduced to a minimum. Moreover, in small groups, STT (student talking time) is maximized and best use is made of the limited time available. The amount of time that a student has to use English is accordingly multiplied resulting in a much more effective use of lesson time. Furthermore, a class of thirty-six individuals can be broken down, for example, into a much more manageable nine groups of four students. The teacher can then monitor these groups and listen, advise and perhaps intervene where necessary. Students feel more confident that their personal learning is being paid attention to, and the teacher has ample chance to ascertain the level of comprehension and monitor progress among individual students. Another advantage of mixing students up for pair work or groupwork is that it can freshen students up (they have to physically move to join a new pair or group), and students often like it: I was surprised to read in student feedback after my first semester at one university just how many of them actually enjoyed the chance of communicating with different students during the lesson. As a useful adjunct to this, it is clear that motivation can be enhanced and interest maintained in the classroom. Anything that boosts the morale of students in the

classroom should be in the toolkit of any teacher! One problem that teachers of English may encounter in the Japanese university classroom is one of seeming apathy towards the subject matter. This can take many guises — students sitting in friendship-cliques towards the back of classrooms, a lack of a response to the teacher's questions, avoiding eye contact with a teacher when addressed, and simply a lack of engagement with the lesson material at hand. All of this has been classed under the umbrella-term 'resistance' by Brian McVeigh, who has written at great length on English teaching in Japanese higher education and certain unhelpful behavior patterns he researched within the classroom. Whether 'resistance' is an apt description or not, it lies outside the scope of this essay and I will not dwell upon it to any greater extent here. Suffice to say that in my experience of teaching English at Japanese universities I can certainly recognize many of the problems he raises and the extent of them has varied not only from institution to institution but also within them. While such behavior does certainly occur it can often be preempted and avoided by good classroom management. Keeping cliques apart, allowing students the comfort zones of small groups where they are less likely to feel inhibited, and good lesson planning that keeps lessons moving at a steady tempo and holds the interest of students, are ways in which one can attempt to deal with this. Poor classroom management and inadequate preparation are, on the other hand, ingredients for a less than effective lesson and poor student participation. One often overlooked, but extremely effective classroom management strategy in building up a healthy relationship with the class and preempting potential problems, is simply the memorization of students' names. This personalizes the classroom, nurtures a healthy and productive teacher-student relationship, and discourages the least-motivated students from slipping into easy anonymity. Meeting a large number of students once or twice a week can make it a

difficult task to memorize names but the effort to do so can reap great dividends in terms of creating an effective classroom environment. The more one can see the students as individuals and not simply as members of large classes, the more one can avoid some of the irritating manifestations of student apathy and boredom. In the case of smaller classes where the students cannot rely on the anonymity of being with a large number of their peers, classroom management is perhaps less important in preempting poor attitudes to teaching. However, it is still important to ensure that STT is maximized and this can again be done by good use of pairwork or small groupwork, followed by brief plenary sessions, if appropriate, where students are able to express themselves in front of the whole group. Again, the teacher should act more as a facilitator and prompter rather than a central focal point as after all, the emphasis is on learner-centeredness rather than the teacher imposing his or her viewpoints and opinions on the class. In my capacity as a teacher of a communication class, I monitor students closely, listen to their taskwork and only intervene when mistakes get in the way of true understanding. Other mistakes can be noted and brought to the attention of the class later in the lesson after the activity has finished. I have found one particularly effective method is to write students' mistakes on the board (anonymously of course) after a particular task and then have the students correct them as a group and give explanations for their corrections. This then helps to reinforce their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar or linguistic forms and functions and also helps to challenge the assumption by many traditionalists that the communicative approach to English does not put enough emphasis on correctness. Harmer even suggests the more time-consuming exercise of teachers writing "individual notes to students, recording mistakes they heard from those particular students with suggestions..." (109). If I may introduce one specific example to highlight what I mean by

this, consider the fact that a form can have many functions and vice versa, a function can have many forms. This is an invaluable step on the way to improving the students' communicative competence. For example, the request for someone to pass something on a table during dinner can have many forms depending on the familiarity and relative status of the two individuals. "Pass the salt" and "Would you mind being so kind as to pass the salt?" would be appropriate in two very different circumstances. It is important that students learn to differentiate the situation and opt for a suitable form for each function. No longer should grammatical accuracy and an extensive knowledge of vocabulary be seen solely as precursors to becoming a good communicator: appropriateness of language, or communicative competence, should be considered very seriously as a major goal in the language classroom. To sum up, classroom management in the Japanese university classroom is not to be underrated. It acts as a key element in a successful lesson and it is every bit as important as the material you teach during it as well as crucial to the smooth progress of the class. Finally, I would like to write a few words on the matter of student evaluation in the communicative English classroom. Often at the university level, classes are subject to end of semester examinations which account for a large share of the overall grade. While this may be an efficient way of testing understanding of material in an orthodox lecture course, it doesn't entirely lend itself to the communicative English classroom. Thus, those students that need external motivation may feel that effort expended during lessons is insufficiently rewarded, and a good exam result at the end of the course becomes the most desirable objective. This is a shame as it doesn't do much to encourage effort and experimentation during lessons. While this again is an unavoidable obstacle, it shouldn't detract from the teacher's aim of instilling an internal motivation in students, if you like, a desire to learn English for the sake of it. As

we have previously discussed, the use of English in realistic situations, the choice of material that forms a bridge with English outside the classroom and then the enhancement and the affirmation of students' own experiences are ways in which such motivation can be instilled. Thus, interest in the content may be one way of motivating students. Another is enthusiasm on the part of the teacher and a willingness to engage students in a meaningful way. The interactive class is predicated on energy and enthusiasm and these can only be drawn out of a student by a teacher who truly feels a passion for improving the English abilities of his or her students. If the students feel that their teacher cares, they are more likely to engage themselves during the lesson time and less likely to rely solely on the result of an end-of-semester examination. Creating a relaxed, enjoyable classroom environment is another powerful tool, as it helps to relax students, and encourages students to forget their anxieties about communicating in a foreign language. Anything that can be done to aid their enjoyment of the class will inevitably raise their inner motivation to study. Whatever, it is probably true to say that students are still mainly interested in the end result, and this is the grade they ultimately receive. Evaluation of communication courses is regrettably too often dominated by such blunt instruments as attendance and end of semester exam results. However, there is still enough leeway to evaluate those students who have tried hard to improve their communicative skills over the course of the semester, particularly through their in-class efforts. It is incumbent on us, as teachers, to use our time effectively in class to observe students, to encourage, motivate and help them, and to give just reward to those who help create an atmosphere of learning. In the end, the teacher is simply a facilitator; the learning must be generated by the students. Those students that take the responsibility for their education should be recognized as such and duly rewarded. By building personal relationships with students,

the teacher can instill enthusiasm and then more easily evaluate improvements in communicative competency and reward the students likewise. With less intrinsically motivated students, such a method of evaluation can become an effective means of providing extrinsic motivation and thus a facilitator to good classroom management.

In this paper, I have attempted to combine the philosophy of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to English teaching with my own experiences of employing it in the Japanese university classroom. We have seen that CLT, rather than being a single monolithic methodology, is actually better defined as an approach combining a number of related methodologies. In using Nunan's five basic guidelines, the central tenets of CLT were discussed in both their theoretical and practical forms. By aligning theory with practice I have attempted to show the reality of adopting such proactive methods in the communication classroom and the advantages of doing so. After several years of largely examination-oriented instruction the communicative approach may come as rather a change for many students. It is thus important to show patience and help the students as much as possible to adjust to these new expectations. CLT places a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of students; indeed, it is this 'learner-centeredness' that acts as a cornerstone to this largely hands-on approach to English study. Furthermore, the unlocking of useful knowledge retained from secondary schooling is important in allowing students to engage freely in activities that are truly practical and relevant. By interacting in English, and using, as much as possible, authentic texts; by utilizing students' own knowledge; and by building a bridge between the classroom and the outside world, I believe that lessons can become more meaningful and interesting for the students. Moreover, it will hopefully equip the students with a practical knowledge of the language within

which they can function effectively and with confidence. This in itself can act as a virtuous circle: one in which students perceive tangible improvements that act as a further spur to confidence and enthusiasm. In addition, by covering some of the main factors related to good classroom management, I have attempted to smooth the introduction of CLT into the university classroom. By recognizing possible obstacles and preempting the potential for disruption, the teacher can endeavor to create a better classroom environment in which students feel more comfortable and confident in interacting in the English language. The goal of communication methodologies is helping students to attain communicative competence and I hope this paper has set out some ways in which this can be achieved in the university classroom.

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