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AN ADAPTATION OF THE COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACH FOR AN ENGLISH CONVERSATION COURSE IN BRAZIL



UMA ADAPTAÇÃO DA ABORDAGEM COMUNICATIVA PARA UM CURSO DE CONVERSAÇÃO EM INGLÊS NO BRASIL

Leonardo Lucena PARISI
Instituto Federal da Paraíba, Brasil

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is one of the most popular pedagogical approaches used in English classrooms worldwide. This paper aims at analyzing how CLT, including its 'strong' and 'weak' forms, could be applied in an English Conversation Course for adult learners in Brazil. A literature review was conducted to convey the main characteristics of this approach: its advantages and disadvantages, the influences received from theories of language acquisition and teaching, and its applicability to different cultural contexts. It was observed that when local culture and students' goals are not taken into account, CLT might not be an

effective approach in certain contexts. After considering the objectives of the Conversation Course, a specific type of application of CLT was chosen. Part of the activities that were performed in class were described and discussed. The article also offered possible modifications that could be applied to increase the effectiveness of the approach to the Conversation Course.



Resumo

A abordagem comunicativa é popularmente utilizada em salas de aula do mundo inteiro no ensino de língua inglesa. Este artigo tem como objetivo avaliar criticamente a abordagem comunicativa no ensino de inglês como segunda língua, além de proporcionar uma apresentação de como é possível pôr em prática tal abordagem, mais especificamente em um curso de conversação no Brasil. Foi conduzido um estudo da literatura sobre as teorias que influenciaram o desenvolvimento desta abordagem. As principais características da abordagem comunicativa, suas vantagens e desvantagens, aplicabilidade em diferentes contextos e algumas de suas críticas foram discutidas, juntamente com as diferentes formas que ela pode se manifestar: forma ‘forte’ ou ‘fraca’. Associado ao estudo teórico, também foi analisado como a abordagem comunicativa foi utilizada em um curso específico de conversação e quais possíveis modificações futuras poderiam ser aplicadas para aumentar sua eficácia de acordo com o contexto e as necessidades dos alunos.

Entradas para indexação

KEYWORDS: Communicative Language Teaching. English language teaching. Conversation course.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Abordagem comunicativa. Ensino de inglês. Curso de conversação.

Texto integral

The aim of this paper is to provide a critique of the communicative approach in English language teaching. First, a brief overview of the theories that have influenced this approach will be presented, followed by its main characteristics and some of the criticism it has received throughout the years. I will also discuss different interpretations of the communicative approach, including its ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ forms, as well as a justification of which version would be more suitable for my current teaching context. Finally, I will give examples of how I put the chosen approach into practice in order to facilitate language learning according to the students’ needs and wants.

Before describing the key elements that make up this highly influential approach of communicative language teaching (CLT), it is essential to review its historical background, covering the theories regarding language acquisition and language teaching that preceded it. Two major approaches often applied before the appearance of CLT are worth mentioning: Grammar-Translated and Audio-lingualism. Both of these approaches viewed language as “a formal system of rules

or structures to be mastered” and language learning as “the inculcation of habits” (Wesche; Skehan, 2002: p. 208). Some of their characteristics, and what would later become sources of criticisms, would include: error avoidance; heavy reliance on exercises and repetition; teacher-centered; and little emphasis on meaningful and contextualized language use.



According to Howatt and Widdowson (2004: p. 327), there was no ‘big book’ that launched CLT; however, they claim Hymes’s concept of ‘communicative competence’ certainly had major influence in this paradigm shift with regard to language pedagogy. Hymes’s work was a response to the Chomskyan notion of ‘competence’. Chomsky’s theory of competence focused on the speaker’s natural ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences, i.e. his main concern was with syntax and the grammatical structures of the language (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). Hymes’s theory, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the social aspects of language use, which included “knowledge of appropriate and effective, as well as correct, language behavior for given communicative goals” (Wesche; Skehan, 2002: p. 209). Furthermore, Hymes claimed that “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless” (1972: p. 278). It is also important to point out that Canale and Swain (1980) believed that the opposite was also true, and so, the rules of use would be useless without the rules of grammar. In addition to grammatical competence (rules of grammar) and sociolinguistic competence (rules of language use), they also argued that discourse competence and strategic competence would integrate the notion of communicative competence.

It would be helpful to take a closer look at these four types of competences in order to understand what they mean. Grammatical competence, also described as linguistic competence (Hedge, 2000), has its main focus on form. However, that is not restricted to grammar rules only, as it also includes other aspects of the language code, such as vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and others. As for sociolinguistic competence, it can be defined as the knowledge of “how to use language in order to achieve certain communicative goals or intentions” (ibid.: p. 48). This competence demands from the speaker some level of understanding of the social context in which the communication takes place, which may consist of (a) role relationships, (b) shared information between participants, and (c) purpose of communication (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). The rules of discourse competence focus mainly on how meaning and form are interconnected. In this case, cohesion devices and coherence rules play an important role. The relationship between these two elements can be seen in this well-known example (Howatt; Widdowson, 2004):

A: That’s the telephone.

B: I’m in the bath.

A: OK.

In this conversation, there are no cohesion devices (grammatical links) between the sentences. Nonetheless, the conversation can be easily understood, even by outside observers, making it a coherent exchange. It can be inferred that in the first sentence, A uses a statement to perform a possible request, while B explains why s/he cannot perform the request, and A acknowledges it. All this conversation is made coherent based on social norms (ibid.). Finally, strategic competence is defined by Canale and Swain (1980: p. 30) as the “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence”. In other words, it refers to the coping strategies speakers use to get their meaning across, even though problems in the communication might have arisen.

This notion of communicative competence, along with some dissatisfaction with previous teaching approaches, helped the development of the communicative language teaching approach. The description of the main characteristics of CLT, as well as some of the criticism it has received, will be discussed in the next section.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

CLT adopted Hymes’s theory, along with the works of other aforementioned authors, such as Canale and Swain, and shifted from the previous focus on form to focus on meaning (even though form was not completely disregarded). Its main goal was to promote communicatively competent learners. Some of CLT’s key characteristics include (Wesche; Skehan, 2002; Richards; Rogers, 2014):

- Language is most likely learned by using it in communication;
- Use of authentic and meaningful texts and/or activities;
- Learner-centered;
- Emphasis on cooperative learning, such as pair and group work;
- Learning involves making errors; and
- Integration of all four skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking).

One popular attempt to integrate the characteristics of CLT in the classroom was the introduction of the ‘Presentation, Practice, and Production’ (PPP) approach. However, according to Harmer (2001), PPP has been extensively criticized for a number of reasons, such as (a) being teacher-centered, (b) not reflecting the nature of language use or language learning, (c) describing only one kind of lesson, and so on. Therefore, it would be a mistake to summarize CLT in one type of procedure.

A wide range of new (or re-visited) types of activities is characteristic of CLT, as these activities are supposed to reflect the principles mentioned previously. Hence, activities in CLT should replicate real and meaningful communication, while involving a variety of language and not just one language structure (Harmer, 2001). According to Prabhu (1987), three types of activities are commonly found in CLT classrooms: information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap. Information-gap activities involve having students improvising the dialogue themselves, as they need to exchange information in order to complete a communicative task. Reasoning-gap activities demand from the students the use of inference, or practical reasoning, common in tasks where they have to work out timetables. Opinion-gap activities focus on the learners' personal preferences, where they might share their opinions on social issues.

The development of CLT also provided new insights for the roles of learners and teachers. Different from other preceding approaches, learners in CLT became more participating, as they are now expected to engage in meaningful communication with other peers. Consequently, the classroom dynamics changed as well; most activities involve pair work and group work (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). Teachers have also assumed other roles in the classroom, such as facilitator, monitor, and needs analyst (ibid.). Even though students became less reliant on teachers, it did not make their job less demanding. Besides the wider range of roles teachers need to perform, Harmer (2001: p. 86) points out that teachers are expected to have a high level of proficiency in order to be prepared for the "relatively uncontrolled range of language use [...] and every language problem" that could arise from the students. In addition, Harmer mentions that this new role generated some criticism, claiming CLT was prejudiced against non-native-speaker teachers.

Because of the many principles pertinent to CLT, as well as the variety of possible classroom activities and dynamics, describing a typical classroom procedure would be very challenging (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). Since CLT has been often been used as an 'umbrella' term for learning sequences in which the main goal is to improve learners' communicative competence, it is understandable that different versions have arisen in the many contexts where CLT is applied (Harmer, 2001). In the next section, I will discuss the 'weak' and 'strong' versions of CLT.

'WEAK' AND 'STRONG' VERSIONS

The 'weak' and 'strong' versions of CLT are the result of different applications of the approach due to the lack of an "easily recognizable pedagogical framework" (Klapper, 2003: p. 33). In the 'weak' version of CLT, spontaneous communication is seen as "an end rather than a means" (Wesche; Skehan, 2002: p. 215). In other words, language is more easily acquired when learners take part in meaningful communicative activities. Weaker versions of CLT also imply that classroom activities tend to be more controlled, so students can practice form and

function, and as they gradually progress, more chances to communicate freely are given (Klapper, 2003).



According to the ‘strong’ version, learning takes place inside the student’s mind through natural processes; therefore, teachers cannot directly control these processes. Rather, teachers are supposed to provide activities that stimulate learners to (a) formulate and/or test hypotheses and (b) develop language skills by using meaningful language (Klapper, 2003). Although sharing the same goals with the ‘weak’ version, ‘strong’ forms of CLT mainly are differentiated by assuming that language is acquired through communication; in other words, instead of learning language to use it, students use language to learn it (Howatt; Widdowson, 2004).

An example of an attempt to develop the ‘strong’ version of CLT is the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). According to Klapper (2003: p. 40, emphasis from original), “TBLT in its strongest form sees tasks as a necessary *and sufficient* driver of language development”. In other words, students would develop linguistic competence by using their language to achieve a genuine outcome (e.g. solving a problem, reaching an agreement, completing a game, etc.). However, a weaker form of TBLT would resemble the ‘weak’ version of CLT for providing an opportunity for explicit focus on language form, which would come towards the end of the class, after initial fluency work was performed (ibid.).

CRITICISMS

The CLT approach has also been the target of some criticism. For over a decade now, CLT’s cultural appropriacy in different contexts has been questioned (Hedge, 2000). Hedge argues that a set of factors have hindered the success of CLT in other cultural contexts, such as: teaching philosophy incompatibility; lack of resources available; different learners’ needs; and heavy linguistics demands from teachers. Pressure from grammar-focused examinations (Richards; Rodgers, 2014) may also be added to this list. That is why authors, such as Wesche and Skehan (2002, p. 216) suggest a gradual implementation of CLT, as well as an adaptation of the goals depending on the local situation.

Another criticism toward CLT is the increased focus given to fluency over accuracy, causing fossilization among learners (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). Probably due to misinterpretations of CLT, the limited view of the linguistic competence results in an over-emphasis on developing good communication skills at the expense of accuracy. Some of other criticisms might include: lack of role for first language; Western-based top-down approach; promoting “native-speakerism”; downgrading of cognitive views of language; and over-use of authentic material irrelevant to the local context (Cook, 2001; Richards; Rodgers, 2014; Klapper, 2003).

In this section, I have described some characteristics of CLT, as well as its shortcomings. I have also displayed two different versions of CLT (‘weak’ and ‘strong’), and in the next section I will explain which one I believe to be more

appropriate for my context (taking into account my students' needs), along with some practical suggestions of how I put this approach into practice.



APPLICATION OF CLT

CONTEXT

For two years, I have taught a *Conversation Course* in Brazil. The course takes place at the Federal University of Paraiba. It lasts for a period of six months and provides students with two-hour classes twice a week. The course is offered by the Federal University for students currently enrolled at any university. With a maximum number of 20 students, some who wished to join the class went through an interview in order to assess if they had the appropriate level of proficiency (at least a B2 level from the Common European Framework of Reference). However, in most cases, students had a B2 proficiency level as they had just finished a three-year extension program also offered by the Federal University.

The *Conversation Course* was created with the main objective of supplying students with a greater focus on their speaking skills. After taking classes with strong focus on form during the three-year program, the students themselves requested classes to develop and practice their speaking skills further. Their individual goals would range from personal reasons to practicing English for professional or educational-related purposes (e.g. students who want a Master's degree at the university are required to be proficient in a foreign language).

CLASSROOM APPLICATION OF CLT

Given CLT's strong emphasis on fluency, it would seem appropriate to use this approach in a course that focuses on speaking. During the two years I taught this conversation course, most of my classes were influenced by a 'weak' form of CLT; meaningful communicative activities were performed during most of the class, however, there were moments that the class shifted to exercises with focus on form. Since the students were all adults, who during most of their learning experience were exposed to traditional methods that emphasized grammar, it seemed to me that the 'strong' version of CLT would have a negative impact. As Hedge (2000) argues, these adults returning to English language study can be discouraged by the new student-centered approach. In addition, Weschen and Skehan (2002) point out, according to other research findings, that there is an inability of the 'strong' version to promote accuracy. Thus, I felt the 'weak' version of CLT would be more beneficial for providing an appropriate balance between fluency work and accuracy work in order to be compatible with the students' needs and, especially, their wants (as they demanded more speaking opportunities).

Some of the characteristics of the classes included: having students frequently worked in pairs or small groups; opinion-gap activities were the most common; focus-on-form activities were present in most classes; errors were not always corrected (except during activities with stronger focus on grammar use); and the use of polemic topics were used, such as corruption, legalization of drugs, and death penalty, in order to engage the students affectively and cognitively. The following description of an activity I have used before is an example of how most classes were driven by opinion-gap exercises, such as discussions and debates:

- Step 1: Students were divided into small groups in which they had to express their opinion on what type of non-governmental organization was most appealing to them. During this stage, students were able to speak freely about the subject. This activity gave students more time to speak than if the discussion involved the whole class simultaneously.
- Step 2: After they had shared their personal views on the subject, the group had to decide on one charity cause for an NGO of their own. Through collaborative work, students were able to accomplish their objective and reach a decision on what type of NGO to choose. They were also given time to decide among themselves on the details of the organization, such as its name, logo, ways of raising money, how to help, and so on.
- Step 3: Finally, each group had to report back to the rest of the class a full description of what their NGO would look like and how it would help others. This stage gave them the opportunity to speak in a more controlled manner, as the groups reported their decisions and the reasoning behind each of them.

The next activity describes how a polemic topic was used to promote a debate in class, as well as engage the students affectively (I will not detail the entire lesson, only an extract of the last activity):

- Step 1: The students watched a few scenes from the film “The Great Debaters”. One of the main topics of the picture is racial discrimination. The students had to observe how the characters debated, e.g. their body language, speech styles, and the main lexical features.
- Step 2: During the next stage, the class was divided into two groups. Each group had to prepare for a debate to be performed in class on the following topic: “Should federal universities in Brazil have a racial quota for their admissions?”
- Step 3: After both groups were finished with their preparation, the debate would take place. This issue of racial quota in Brazilian universities has been a polemic topic in the country and, consequently, it would likely allow students to engage in the discussion affectively.

FUTURE MODIFICATIONS

After extensive readings on the different forms of CLT applications, I feel that some changes to my teaching might benefit students from my context. One change I believe would be helpful is the use of information-gap activities. As it was mentioned before, most of my classes had opinion-gap activities; therefore, by using more exercises based on information-gap, a wider variety of activities for students would be provided. According to Harmer (2001: p. 85), information-gap is a “key to the enhancement of communicative purpose and the desire to communicate”. I trust that by having two or more students working together as they improvise the dialogue to bridge the information gap between them would be highly productive and meaningful.

Another change I would try to incorporate in my classes would be using activities to promote strategic competence. Students need to develop strategic competence to help them keep the communicative channel open, even after they encounter some linguistic limitations (Canale; Swain, 1980). According to Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991), the lack of such strategies might explain how students, who are considered to be linguistically competent, are unable to carry out a communicative intent. This argument reminded me of oral exams I had conducted in class, where some of the best students had trouble keeping up with the flow of what they were trying to say. I have tried to instruct students explicitly about the importance of this strategy, as well as providing examples of fillers (e.g. “well”, “you know”, “as a matter of fact”) and encouraging them to paraphrase. However, I had never thought about using activities that focused on these strategies. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) offer a wide range of practical ideas for strategy training, which I believe would be helpful for students. One of their examples of activity that focuses on paraphrasing has the teacher handing out slips of paper with the name of an object. Then, students would have to explain the word without actually saying what it is, while the rest of the class tries to guess the name of the object.

One last adaptation I would like to try with my groups from the *Conversation Course* would be the addition of activities from TBLT. The ‘strong’ version of TBLT (mentioned previously) might provide a new dynamic to the class, and so it may be worth trying implementing it at least in some classes. However, since some students still have problems with accuracy, I believe that a weaker version of TBLT would be more appropriate. Thus, I would start the class with fluency-focused tasks that only later lead to form-focused practice.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed language and learning theories that played major roles in the development of the Communicative Language Teaching approach. Hymes’s notion of ‘communicative competence’ was the language acquisition theory that influenced CLT the most (Howatt; Widdowson, 2004). His theory emphasized the importance of knowledge of appropriate language use for specific communicative goals, instead of focusing mainly on syntax as Chomsky did

(ibid.). With the main goal of promoting communicative competence among students, CLT shifted the focus from grammatical structures (typical from the Grammar-Translated approach and Audio-lingualism approach) to meaningful language use.

The CLT approach stressed the use of different language forms in a variety of contexts and purposes (Harmer, 2001). This new goal changed the way English was taught. Some of the main characteristics of CLT include (a) plenty of exposure to realistic language use, and (b) plenty of opportunities to use the language in meaningful activities. It is also worth mentioning that grammatical structures were not neglected; as Hedge (2000: p. 47) argues, there is a large misconception that CLT “does not aim for a high standard of formal correctness”. Therefore, CLT aims at improving both linguistic and pragmatic competences.

Two versions of CLT have emerged as an attempt to describe how language acquisition would most likely take place: ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ forms. Even though they both share the same goal of promoting communicative competence through meaningful language use, the ‘weak’ version still provides to some extent focus on form, whereas the ‘strong’ version claims that linguistic competence can be developed as learners use the target language while focusing on meaning (Klapper, 2003). Based on my teaching context described previously, the ‘weak’ version of CLT seems more suitable, given its explicit balance of fluency and accuracy.

I have also provided examples of how CLT was applied in the *Conversation Course* I have taught for the past two years. Since the objective of the course is to develop the speaking skill more than the others, I used CLT to provide students with plenty of opportunities to speak. Their speaking time was increased by working in pairs and small groups, as they discussed polemic topics and shared their opinions. Some of their errors were not corrected so the students were not discouraged to participate. However, in order to improve their accuracy, error-correction was more prominent during activities that focused on the grammar aspects of the language.

To sum up, it is clear that CLT has had an enduring impact in language teaching and learning. As a result, different applications have been developed and are applied in classrooms worldwide (Richards; Rodgers, 2014). Nonetheless, CLT is not free of some criticism; probably the most common one being its applicability in different cultural contexts (Hedge, 2000). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to keep investigating its relevance and usefulness, in order to make CLT even more suitable for learners.

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O autor

Leonardo Lucena Parisi é graduado em Letras – Inglês na UFPB, mestre em English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics na King's College London e professor de Inglês – EBT do Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia da Paraíba.