1 The role of the English language teacher in Communicative Language Teaching

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Key words

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Meaningful communication

Teacher as facilitator

Real-life situations

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What has the influence of CLT been on classroom practice in Austria?

What are the main characteristics of CLT?

What is the difference between 'strong' and 'weak' CLT?

What is meant by the 'post-communicative approach'?

What is the role of the teacher in CLT?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Two changes concerning language teaching in the last few decades seem to have shaped the landscape of foreign language teaching in Austria. The first one occurred in 2004 when language teaching was brought in alignment with the Common European Framework in a new curriculum. As a result, the focus was not on a knowledge-based curriculum that specified topics to be covered anymore, which had been the case before, but on a competence-oriented communicative curriculum. This first change required teachers to consider the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in their teaching in order to implement these curricular changes (Spöttl et al., 2016).

The second change was the introduction of a standardised school-leaving exam in 2015/16 (*Matura – standardisierte Reife- und Diplomprüfung SRDP*), which reinforced the new focus on language skills rather than factual knowledge. This far-reaching change, even more than the new curriculum, led to a re-examination of how teachers approached language teaching. For example, researchers have noted an increased interest in the authenticity and communicative purpose of writing tasks in the classroom and for homework in preparation for the *Matura* (Kremmel et al., 2018).

Both of these changes are also mirrored in the most recent version of the curriculum for English language teacher education (2019/2021) with its strong focus on CLT. What is striking about this curriculum is the list of competences which future language teachers have to acquire during their studies. It also emphasises skills such as reflection, awareness, critical examination and evaluation which language teachers are expected to master in order to be able to teach a complex competence-based curriculum.

CLT in practice

As CLT is the prevailing methodology used by English language teachers in Austria, this approach is worth addressing, all the more so as it is notoriously hard to define (Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2006; Scrivener, 2005; Ur, 2012). However, there seem to be certain characteristics that are found in every definition:

- Language is for communication
- All skills have a communicative purpose
- Emphasis is put on what language is used for
- Learners learn by participating in meaningful communication
- Meaning is more important than accuracy
- Meaning is negotiated between the learners and the teacher and the learners among themselves

As Harmer (2015) points out, CLT is often seen as a term "to describe a philosophy which stresses the communicative nature of language, rather than as a precise description of a method" (p. 58). Still, there are certain activities which particularly promote purposeful communication and the negotiation of meaning and are therefore strongly associated with CLT. Examples of such activities are functional dialogues (e.g., asking for directions), role plays (e.g., ordering in a restaurant) and information-gap activities (e.g., two students have to read different texts about a famous city and then communicate with each other to write their own text about it).

The fact that CLT is not very clearly defined inevitably affects teachers' implementation. While most language teachers today use communication-focussed activities in their teaching and describe their teaching style as communicative, many regularly include tasks in their lessons that are more focussed on accuracy and explicit grammar instruction. This 'weak CLT' is also supported by most coursebooks and is much more common than 'strong CLT' where explicit instruction is extremely limited (Scrivener, 2005; see Practical Applications at the end of this chapter for examples of 'weak' and 'strong' CLT).

It is also worth mentioning here that the influence of CLT can be seen in popular approaches such as Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL, see chapter 17 in this volume). The latter is particularly relevant in the Austrian context due to its increasing popularity at all levels of education (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2019). Like CLT, CLIL is based on the assumption that learners acquire the L2 best through meaningful communication. In this case, students communicate about the content of non-language school subjects such as physics or history. In the 'hard' version on CLIL, the focus is more on the content, while 'soft' CLIL allows for more language instruction.

There is no doubt that CLT has had a wide-reaching influence on language teaching. However, in reality, few teachers follow one method exclusively, and this also applies to CLT. Most methodologists refer to this picking and choosing of elements from different methodologies as the post-communicative approach, which is eclectic in nature. While its focus is still on communication, it also borrows from other methodologies. For example, a teacher who teaches communicatively might still use drills (a typical feature of the audiolingual approach) occasionally if they consider this method appropriate for their own classroom and learning goals. Teachers' collection of preferred methods and activities has been described as their "personal methodology" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 40). Building a personal methodology requires the ability to critically reflect on and evaluate materials and new approaches teachers are confronted with in the course of their career – a goal which is central to the current language teacher education curriculum.

The role of the teacher in CLT

In the course of a lesson, a language teacher takes on many different roles, for example the role of "controller", "resource and tutor" and "organiser / task setter" (Harmer, 2015, pp. 116-117). All of these roles serve a purpose in order to allow learners to achieve the given learning goals. In the case of CLT, the most important goal is to enable communication, which determines the role the teacher plays. For this reason, the teacher often acts as a "facilitator and monitor" who provides the parameters and support in the background rather than as a director who micromanages what happens at every point in the lesson (Richards, 2006, p. 5). These two contrasting teacher roles are often referred to as the 'guide on the side' and the 'sage on the stage', respectively, in the literature.

The popularity of roleplays in CLT underscores the 'guide on the side' role of the teacher. In a CLT lesson, the teacher will often set up a roleplay that is based on a

real-life situation that they expect their learners to encounter, e.g., shopping, asking for directions, leading a meeting, expressing their opinions in a discussion. At the beginning of the activity, the teacher explains the context and purpose and assigns the roles. While the learners work on the roleplay, the teacher observes in the background and facilitates the communication where needed. During the activity, the teacher does not interrupt the learners' communication by correcting their language, nor do they interfere as the learners negotiate meaning. This does not mean that accuracy is completely disregarded. Learners often receive feedback on this aspect of their language production after the end of the activity, most commonly in the form of general feedback for the whole group.

It is clear from this example that, unlike in more traditional approaches, there is not a lot of lecturing ('chalk and talk') by the teacher in CLT. Knowledge is not transmitted from the teacher to the learners, but rather constructed together. Therefore, it can be said that it is not only the teacher's role that is different compared to traditional approaches, but also the learners' role as they are expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning (Richards, 2006). Thus, CLT is only one example of how our conceptualisations of teaching and learning have expanded to embrace greater learner autonomy and independence. Its enduring popularity shows that our understanding of language teaching has changed considerably over the last few decades, and will most likely continue to evolve as new insights into language teaching and learning become available to teachers.

Practical Applications

Example 1

Goal: learners will practice asking and answering questions in a formal setting; learners will use topic-related language

Activity: role play – job interview

Rationale: to practice a real-life situation

Pre-knowledge: wh- questions, language of interviews, structure of interviews

Level: B1 and above

Procedure

1. Teacher provides job advertisements from newspapers.

2. Learners form groups of four.

3. Teacher gives one job advertisement to each group.

4. Learners read the advertisement and discuss it.

5. In their groups, learners write two biographical descriptions for suitable candidates.

6. Half of each group plays the interviewers and should come up with questions for the given job advertisement.

7. The other half of the group plays the role of each of the interviewees. They should familiarize themselves with the biographical descriptions of their respective candidate.

8. Learners perform their role-play in small groups using wh-questions or learners perform the role-plays in front of the class. The interviewers carry out an interview with each candidate in turn.

9. Teacher provides feedback to the whole class.

Example 2

Goal: learners will work together to solve a murder mystery; learners will practice storytelling; learners will revise and practice the correct use of the past simple and the past progressive in narrative contexts

Activity: group speaking task – Murder Mystery

Rationale: to encourage learners to exchange information with other learners to solve a mystery; to raise learners' awareness of past simple / past progressive in stories

Pre-knowledge: familiarity with the basic elements of a crime story; some knowledge of narrative tense use in the past

Level: B1 and above

Procedure

1. The teacher prepares a story about a murder mystery and role cards for the students. An example can be found here: https://onestopenglish.com/games/lesson-share-speaking-murder-in-the-classroom/154250.article.

2. The teacher puts students into groups. The group size depends on the number of roles in the game. In addition to one student for every role, it is a good idea to have a note-taker who writes down everybody's contribution.

3. The teacher reads out the mystery that the learners have to solve and explains that they should study their role cards carefully as every role card contains information about their character's relationship with the victim and about what they were doing at the time of the murder. This information will help their group to solve the mystery if they work together.

4. The learners study their role cards. When they are familiar with the content, each learner in the group shares the information on their cards which they believe to be relevant. The note-taker writes down everybody's contributions. At this stage, the teacher is available for questions and to help with vocabulary, but does not correct learners' language use.

5. The learners discuss the information the note-taker has collected and work out who does not have an alibi for the time of the murder and must therefore be the murderer.

6. The teacher confirms or corrects the conclusions the different groups have reached.

7. The teacher elicits information about the alibis of different characters in the mystery from the learners, e.g., 'What was X doing when she heard the shot?' – 'X was chatting to her friend when she heard the shot.' These sentences can be written on the board.

8. The teacher draws learners' attention to the way the past simple (events) and the past progressive (background) are used in the example sentences. The teacher and learners discuss this pattern and add more examples, gradually moving beyond individual sentences and towards a narrative.

9. For homework, learners write a short statement from their character's point of view that provides an alibi for them, using the pattern they have practiced.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Study the tasks in the Practical Applications section of this chapter and decide which one represents 'strong CLT' and which one 'weak CLT'. Explain why.

2. In what way is the standardised *Matura* 'communicative'?

3. Look at a unit in a coursebook you are currently using / you are familiar with and identify the principles of CLT reflected in it.

4. Consider your own teacher role. Where do you see yourself on the continuum from director to facilitator?

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Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Suggestions for further reading

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques & principles in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.

This book introduces different methods for teaching languages, including content-based instruction and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). In addition to the theoretical principles behind each method, it also gives an insight into how the method works in the classroom.

Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge University Press.

This book provides an overview of the historical development of CLT and how it is being understood and implemented today. It includes reflective tasks for the reader.

Spiro, J. (2013). *Changing methodologies in TESOL*. Edinburgh University Press.

This book explores the changes in English language teaching and learning over the years. The reading activities, discussions and links to online resources make the book a very accessible resource.

Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

This book provides an overview of English language teaching by combining both theory and practice. The author considers the teaching of the various skills and also has a chapter dedicated to CLIL.

Commentary on reflection questions

1. The job interview role play represents a 'strong CLT' approach because the teacher provides the general framework for the task and the learners work independently and communicate among themselves. There is very little explicit instruction and the teacher primarily facilitates the session.

The Murder Mystery activity represents a 'weak CLT' approach. The elements of 'strong CLT' discussed above are present; however, there is explicit grammar instruction and a strong focus on language patterns, too.

2. The tasks are based on real-life communicative situations, which include an awareness of context, purpose and audience. The focus is on language skills and communication, not content knowledge.

3. to **4.** Your answers to these reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on CLT.