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# Communicative Approach: Some Misapprehensions

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**Abstract**

*Though Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is acknowledged by the National Curriculum & Textbook Board (NCTB) and many English teachers as one of the most effective approaches in English language teaching in Bangladesh, there are still a number of misapprehensions about it. By comparing Johnstone; Sato and Kleinsasser and Thompson as well as Spada, this article focuses on four of the main misapprehensions, which are usually held by the language teachers and researchers.*

**Keywords**: CLT, misapprehensions, Meaning, Learner Error, Learners' L1

**Introduction**

Communicative Language Teaching is commonly regarded as one of the most popular approaches to language teaching. It would be fair to say that if there is any one umbrella approach to language teaching that has become the accepted "norm" in this field, it would have to be the Communicative language teaching approach (CLT). It is based on the theory that the primary function of language use is communication. One of the fundamental principles of CLT is that learners need to engage in meaningful communication to attain communicative fluency as well as accuracy in ESL settings. So its primary goal is for learners to develop 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1971), or simply put, communicative ability. Communicative approach (to language teaching) aims at developing the communicative competence of the learners which would include the learners acquiring the knowledge of communicative functions of the language and linguistic means to perform the different kinds of functions

(Halliday,1970).Therefore, many teachers think that CLT stresses the speaking and listening in order to improve their communicative ability by focusing on meaning, and minimizes error correction for maintaining the flow of conversation. In this article, the writer tries to analyze the misapprehensions about CLT which are commonly held by the language teachers.

## 1. CLT means an exclusive focus on meaning

Right now, the most popular misapprehension of CLT should be that CLT is an approach to foreign language education which focuses on meaning to the exclusion of any attention to language forms. But, with the view of most applied linguists---especially British applied linguists, this characterization of CLT is not consistent, because they have recognized the importance of a formal language component with CLT. According to their understanding, CLT should be a language educational approach that was intended to include communication, which was not intended to exclude form.

However, many language teachers in Bangladesh were influenced by applied linguists such as Prabhu (1987), who argued that grammar is too complex to be taught, and second language acquisition researchers like Krashen (1982), who claimed that grammar can only be acquired unconsciously through exposure to the target language, so they believe that a special attention should be given to the meaning, not to the form.

What does classroom research on L2 learning and teaching has to say about this? Since 1980s, classroom researchers and program evaluators have carried out a great deal of researches on the effectiveness of CLT in many countries. Savignon (1972) did an experimental study to examine the contributions of CLT to L2 learning. Her research investigated the effects of adding a communicative component to university-level audio-lingual classes in French. Comparisons of learners who had received the additional component with those who received either an additional cultural component or further audio-lingual practice revealed that learners in the communicative component performed better on the communicative test than those  in the cultural or audio-lingual groups. Learners in the communicative group also performed at least as well on the linguistic tasks as learners in the other two groups. These results demonstrated the benefits of adding a communicative component to structure-based teaching. Since Savignon's study, other classroom research has indicated that CLT contributes positively to the L2 learners' fluency and communicative abilities. Furthermore, in some instances (e.g. Canadian French immersion programs), CLT has enabled L2 learners to develop comprehension abilities that parallel those of native speakers (Genesee, 1987). At the same time, observational research in CLT classrooms, particularly those in which no attention is given to language form, has shown that students often fail to reach high levels of development and accuracy in many aspects of language(Harley and Swain, 1984, Spada and Lightbown, 1989). The experimental research results have indicated that the inclusion of form-focused instruction leads to improvement in students' knowledge and their ability to use that knowledge (Norris and Ortega, 2000 and Spada, 1997).In Bangladesh, there are many language teachers who practice communicative approach by a proper  balance of form and meaning via combination Grammar-Translation into their classroom; some other reject the CLT because of this misapprehension of

*English Language Teaching* , and they have realized that exclusive focus on meaning will fail to develop students' language competence. But actually, CLT is not conceptualized as an approach that was intended to exclude form but rather one that was intended to include communication. In CLT by Retrieving Text Order, the learner becomes familiar with the use of cohesive devices (and, or, nevertheless, etc.), anaphoric pronouns (the boy=he: the dog=it) and semantic clues (use of lexical items, topic, etc.)(Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

### 2. CLT means no explicit focus on learner errors

For teachers, there is an embarrassment for fluency and accuracy, especially when they meet learner errors. So another misapprehension about CLT is that it should not include corrective feedback. This idea was affected by the fact that many teachers have been educated to believe that errors are evidence that the learner is testing hypotheses about the target language and in the process, progress is being made. The assumption is that with sufficient time and opportunities to hear and practice the language, the learners' errors will eventually be replaced with target-like forms. In CLT, there has been a great change in the attitude towards error and error correction of learners. Errors are no longer regarded as sinful but are recognized as a necessary and systematic part of the learning process. And the resources for correction(and self correction) have been greatly expanded too(Alan Maley ,1984) While some researchers have argued for the total rejection of any type of corrective feedback (Truscott, 1999), this represents an extreme view and is not typical of how most CLT teachers and researchers view feedback on learner errors (Lyster,1999). Instead, the type of corrective feedback that is widely encouraged and accepted in CLT is implicit and does not interfere with communication. For example, a particular type of feedback, which is called RECAST, has been observed to occur frequently in CLT classrooms. A recast is the teacher's reformulation of a learner's incorrect utterance while maintaining a focus on meaning: for example, the L2 learner says, "His foots are cold," and the teacher responds by saying, "Yes, his feet are cold---he has stayed outside for a long time!" The recast serves as corrective feedback by providing the learner with the correct form while at the same time confirming the content of the learner's utterance and continuing with the conversation. There are a number of advantages of recast. First, one can be more confident of gaining the student's attention, since one is talking about topics of interest to the student. There is also a strong likelihood that the student will comprehend at least part of what is being said to them, since lexical items are being reflected back to them from their own utterance. Recasts are thus an effective means of maintaining conversation with very beginning learners. It is not surprising, therefore, that they figure heavily in student-teacher discourse (Brown and Bellugi, 1964; Chouiniard and Clark, 2003). They also figure in a range of theoretical approaches to teacher-learner interaction, including interactional linguistics (Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001) and conversation analysis (Norrick, 1991). According to Brandl. K (2008), the provision of "error corrective" and "positive" feedback as a fundamental principle of CLT

permeates all areas of instruction and constitutes a necessity in support of the learning process. And he suggests teachers use recast for feedback during the teaching.

## 3. CLT means listening and speaking practice

The academicians of Bangladeshi ELT context said that, for many learners, the main uses that they are likely to make of the language are oral: getting around in the foreign country if they visit it, talking to visitors from that country, etc. CLT is just for meeting of the learners' needs, therefore, the emphasis of language teaching is likely to be on speaking and listening skills, which is the focus of L2 instruction under the guidance of audio-lingua method. However, from the beginning, many CLT researchers agreed that one of the basic tenets of CLT was that linguistics skills and communicative abilities should not be treated in isolation from each other (Savignon, 1997). In his discussion of the importance of attention to discourse in CLT, Widdowson(1978) claims: " What the learners need to know how to do is to compose in the act of writing, comprehend in the act of reading, and to learn techniques of reading by writing and techniques of writing by reading" (P. 144). Influenced by Widdowson and others, CLT material writers have produced reading texts that are much more varied in terms of their content than in those typical of traditional structure-base instruction. Also, texts that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of particular groups of L2 readers (e.g. English for academic /scientific purposes) are abundant in CLT pedagogical libraries. moreover the experiences that L2 learners needs to keep in mind the relevant contextual and social factors contributing to their comprehension (i.e. listening and reading) and production (i.e. speaking and writing) has always been part of the fundamental principles and practices of CLT.CLT is the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.  (Nunan, 1991:279)  A glance at recent mainstream textbooks by NCTB (namely communicative English) in Bangladesh will immediately find that they are also likely to be reading and writing a more varied range of texts than those in more traditional classes. CLT involves encouraging learners to take part in---and reflect on---communication in as many different  contexts as possible (and as many as necessary, not only for their future language-using needs, but also for their present language  learning needs). An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language (Nunan, 1991:279)

## 4. CLT means avoidance of the learners' L1

Though the teaching methods popular in the 20th century differed in many ways, they nearly all tried to avoid using the students' first language (L1) in the classroom. The only exceptions were the Grammar-translation Method, which still seems to keep going on despite the serious critics and the short-lived Reading Method in US in the 1930s. But everything else from the Direct Method to the Audio-lingual Method to Communicative Language Teaching insists that the less the L1 is used in the classroom, the better the teaching. In the early days the L1 was explicitly

rejected, going back to the language teaching revolutions of the late 19th century. Later the L1was seldom mentioned as a possibility, apart from occasional advise about how to avoid it; for example, in task-based learning (one form of CLT) for beginners 'DON'T Vol. 1, No. 1 *English Language Teaching* ban mother tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language' (Willis, 1996,P.130). This suggests that either the mother tongue does not play an important role in foreign language teaching or the issue of native language use does not exist in the classroom, since most of them are native speaker of English accustomed to working with multilingual group of students. The argument against the use of L1 in L2 classrooms is obvious: Learners need as much exposure to the target language as they can get in order to become successful learners of that language. Mother- tongue (first language or L1) interference could be limitlessly frequent in a linguistically homogeneous ELT class unless the teacher authoritatively monitors and controls the situation. Students "in small groups will covertly use their native language"(Brown, 2001:180).  This is supported by considerable evidence that both the quantity and quality of target language input are crucial factors in L2 learning (Gass, 1997; Lightbown, 1991). However, in a recent paper that calls for a re-examination of the restrictions on L1 use in L2 classrooms, Cook (2001) argues that while "no one will quarrel with providing models of real language use for the students… (this is) not necessarily incompatible with L1 use in the classroom" (P. 409). Sensible arguments can be made for the principled use of L1 in L2 classrooms and there is theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical support for it. For example, the belief that first and second languages exist in separate compartments in the mind and therefore should be kept separate in the classroom has not received empirical support. The notion of a common underlying proficiency has pointed to important benefits of L1 knowledge and use particularly for minority language children in bilingual education programs (Ramirez, 1992). This work has shown that there is significant transfer of conceptual knowledge and skills across languages. In a recent study of the L2 development of French immersion students engaged in collaborative tasks, Swain and Lapkin (2002) report that the use of the L1 enabled students to continue with the task and in the process to move forward in achieving their linguistic goals. In addition, Turnbull (2001) points to several pedagogic benefits of L1 use in the classroom (e.g. saving time, providing clearer and more concise explanation). Despite the evidence that the L1 can have an important and positive role to play in L2 learning, CLT researchers mentioned that we must be careful about exactly how much L1 use is productive. And some CLT researchers suggest that languages teachers present in the classroom must base on the comprehension of the students, otherwise no learning can occur. A teacher's goal needs to be to find the right balance between the use of L1 and L2, which ensures students understanding and at the same time maximizes the use of the target language. Translation (L1-L2) may be used where students need or benefit from it(Finnochiaro and Brumfit 1983:91-93).

**Conclusion**

In view of the fact that Since the beginning of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1970s, there have been different definitions and interpretations of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. So, it is no surprise that there are a lot of misapprehensions about CLT. The four misapprehensions outlined above are most commonly held by the language teachers and researchers. Scenarios might vary with the diversions of contexts. Consequently, the CLT teachers should be enthusiastically equipped with professional awareness and in depth teaching knowledge to take speedy realistic and fresh steps to win over the newly sprung hurdles**.**

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