

A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING - ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

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The origins of Communicative Language Teaching are to be found in the changes in the British language teaching dating from the late 1960s. Until then, the Situational Language Teaching represented the major British approach to teaching English as a foreign language. In the Situational Language Teaching, language was taught by practising basic structures in meaningful situation based activities. The main characteristics of the approach were as follows.

Language teaching begins with the spoken language, the material being presented orally before being presented in the written form. The target language is the language of the classroom and the new language items are introduced and practiced situationally. Vocabulary selection procedures are followed in order to ensure that an essential general service vocabulary is covered while items of grammar are graded following the principle simple forms should be taught before the complex ones. As to reading and writing they are introduced once a sufficient lexical and grammatical basis has been established.

By the end of the 1960s it was clear that the situational approach was worn out and that there was no future in language teaching by predicting language on the basis of situational events. Two important points of view led to a new approach to language teaching. Noam Chomsky in his 'Syntactic Structures' pointed out that the standard structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristics of language, that is the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. On the other hand, British applied linguists emphasized another fundamental dimension of language, that was inadequately addressed in the current approaches to language

teaching at that time, that is the functional and communicative potential of language. They realised the need to focus in the language teaching on the communicative proficiency rather than on the mere mastery of structures.

With the changing educational realities in Europe and the increasing interdependence of European countries, there came the need to teach adults the major languages of the European Common Market and the Council of Europe. In this new background, the British linguist D. A. Wilkins proposed a functional or communicative definition of the language that could serve as a basis developing communicative syllabuses in language teaching. His contribution to language teaching was a deep analysis of the communicative meanings that a language learner needs to understand and express, in other words the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of the language. He described two types of meanings: one of notional categories including concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, frequency and another one for categories of communicative function including requests, denials, offers, complaints.

The Communicative Language Teaching, also called the Notional or Functional Approach, is seen rather as an approach than a method in language teaching that aims to make the communicative competence the goal of language teaching and to develop procedures for the teaching of the four skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. The Communicative Language Teaching is more comprehensive than any other approaches or methods; it is different in form and status. There is no single or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative.

For some, Communicative Language Teaching means just a little more than an integration of grammatical and functional teaching. In this respect Littlewood in his 'Communicative Language Teaching' in 1981 states that one of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as to structural aspects of the language. For others, Communicative Language Teaching means using procedures where learners work in pairs or groups making use of the available language resources in problem-solving tasks. What is essential is that at least two parties are involved in an interaction or transaction of some kind where one party has an intention and the other party expands or reacts to the intention.

Howatt in 'A History of English Language Teaching'-1983, distinguishes between a 'weak' and a 'strong' version of Communicative Language Teaching. The 'weak' version stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching. The 'strong' version of communicative teaching claims that language is acquired through communication, so it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. So, the former could be described a 'learning to use' English and the latter entails 'using English to learn' it.

The wide acceptance of the communicative approach and the relatively varied way in which it is interpreted and applied can be attributed to the fact that practitioners from different educational traditions can identify with it and consequently interpret it in different ways. In this line of thought Savignon in 'Communicative Competence'-1982, offers as a precedent of Communicative Language Teaching a commentary by Montaigne on his learning Latin through conversation rather than through the customary method of formal analysis and translation:

'Without methods, without a book, without grammar or rules, without a whip and without tears I had learned a Latin as proper as that of my schoolmaster's. This antistructural view can be held to represent the language learning version from a more general learning perspective, usually referred to as 'learning by doing' or 'the experience approach'.

The focus on communicative and contextual factors in language use has an antecedent in the work of the linguist John Frith. Frith is credited with focussing attention on discourse as subject and context for language analysis. He also stressed that language needed to be studied in the broader sociocultural context of its use which included participants, their behaviour and beliefs, the objects of linguistic discussion and word choice.

Another dimension of Communicative Language Teaching, its learner-centred and experience-based view of second language teaching also has forerunners outside the language teaching tradition. For example an important American National Curriculum Commission in 1930 began its report.

With the premise that 'Experience is the best of all schools...' so the ideal curriculum should consist of 'well-selected experiences'. Like those who have recently urged the organization of Communicative Language Teaching around tasks and procedures the committee tried to suggest that the curriculum should consist of appropriate experiences stretching across the years of school study. Individual learners were seen as possessing unique interests, styles, needs and goals which should be reflected in the design of the methods of interaction.

Common to all versions of Communicative Language Teaching is a theory of language teaching/learning that starts from a communicative model of language and language use that seeks to translate this into a design for an instructional system, for materials and their use, for teacher and learner roles and behaviours and for classroom activities and techniques.