



**WE COULDN'T COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH, COULD WE?
THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH PRACTICES, A CRITICAL VIEW**

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ABSTRACT

Based on a brief background of its history, Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) will be critically evaluated as theoretical principles as well as its practice in teaching English as a foreign language in the Arab world. The field of language teaching has passed through many changes and shifts over the last few decades. Some suppose that the language instruction has at last come of age (Harper, Lively, and Williams, 1998); others consider it as the post-method area (Richards and Rodgers 2001). In general, it is thought that there is no one particular best method that achieves the goals and meets the needs of all learners and teachers. However, I believe that the flexibility of CLT explains why it can continue and dominate the teaching environments. The term Communicative approach is an umbrella for all teaching methods whose goals are improving students' abilities to communicate. It embraces all kinds of teaching approaches. Most lessons presentations I have seen so far about Task Based Approach, Humanistic Approach and even Total Physical Response Method are communicative. There was communication between the teacher and the students or among students themselves. The purpose of my writing is to highlight some of the difficulties of the application of this approach in the Arab world especially Egypt although I do believe those points of weakness could be easily overcome by a few modifications and regulations. This article is divided into four main sections; the first is an introduction and a historical background about CLT. The second is the CLT theoretical principles with a critical view. The third is a critical evaluation of the CLT practice especially in the Arab World. Finally, there is a conclusion followed by references.

Key Words: Communicative approach, EFL teaching, Arab world, Critical view.

1. Historical Background:

The Grammar-Translation Method dominated the language instruction for several decades. It was a method that depended on mainly textbooks, vocabulary and explanation of rules with little oral speaking. But the need to oral proficiency led to many opposing movements that led to the development of new methods of teaching that are still known today (Richard and Rogers, 2001). Over the years it has been clear for the CLT proponents that knowing the grammatical forms and structures did not help the students well to use the language they are learning efficiently when communicating with others.

It is assumed that CLT appeared as a reaction to the Grammar Translation Method and it has been calling for learning through real communication and situations, and the forbidden use of the native language. However using native language is accepted and translation may be used where feasible (Brumfit, 1984). In my opinion, CLT Approach was not only a reaction to the Grammar Translation

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Method but it was also a reflection to the communication and the technology revolution at that time. Advancements in technology have changed most social activities; the television became the dominant media. Likewise, humanity had entered the space age by putting a man on the moon. It was a generation with fondness of change. Collectively, those suggested a need for a new teaching approach matching that communication revolution.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) originated from the changes in the British Situational Language Teaching approach dating from the late 1960s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) with a goal to develop learners' "communicative competence", it evolves as a prominent language teaching method and gradually replaced the previous Grammar-Translation Method and Audio-Lingual Method (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). It aims at the ability to use the language appropriately to achieve the communication goal. Fluency is the primary goal, and then accuracy comes.

I think that In spite of using CLT for a long time now, many teachers especially in the Arab World have partial grasp of it because of the insufficient knowledge of the Approach's classroom techniques. Away from its principles that focus on communication, pair work, group work activities and maximum target language use, there is a little agreement on its methodology and still less consensus on the theoretical principles of the method (British Council Research Papers by Garton & Copland, 2011).

2. Theoretical Principles:

2.1 What Is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)?

CLT is an approach that reflects a certain model or research paradigm, or a theory (Celce-Murcia, 2001). It is based on the theory that the primary function of language use is communication. Its primary goal is the communicative ability. In other words, it puts emphasis on interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning.

Regarding to theory, Johnson (1996) observes that the CLT is linked to some psychological theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It has been affected by many branches of knowledge like sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

The learning process is natural so that it leads to acquisition. Learning the language is based on its practice and real communication. The difficulty here from my point of view is how to make learning natural, and how teachers can provide and develop real situations. CLT emphasizes on communication and implicitly on methodology, it gives out the suggestion that CLT will work anywhere. It does not give enough attention to the context in which it happens (Bax, 2003).

Communicative Competence:

The goal of CLT is to develop what Hymes referred to as "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972). Hymes coined this term in order to contrast Chomsky's theory of competence. Chomsky supposed that the linguistic theory studies are only concerned about abstract language in a vacuum, the perfect language which is not affected by actual practice in the society. For Chomsky, the linguistic theory is based on characterizing the abstract abilities that speakers own to help them produce grammatically correct sentences in the target language. In contrast, Hymes argued that such a view of linguistic theory was sterile, that linguistic theory needed to be seen as part of a more general theory incorporating communication and culture. Hymes's theory of communicative competence was a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community (Klapper, 2006). I think both views are valuable. Hymes considered language learning from the proficiency of communication while Chomsky concerned with accuracy.

The communicative competence is the learner's ability to understand and use language correctly to communicate in realistic situations. This includes both the spoken and written language and the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. This may be considered a merit for creative teachers who can create this environment. But to be honest, creative teachers are suffering from economic and social problems in the Arab world in general and in Egypt in particular, whereas in rich Arab countries, teachers are not qualified enough to be creative. Even if highly qualified teachers with 100% creativity are recruited, students have been used to spoon-feeding since decades. The blame does not only lie on the students but also on the primitive teaching techniques that have not replaced for many years.

2.3 Fluency & Accuracy

Accuracy and Fluency are the goals of any classroom activities, a distinction first made by (Brumfit, 1984). Accuracy activities, such as pattern drills are usually presented in the teaching of a new target entry; Fluency activities, such as extensive reading and information gap target students' natural communications skills in applying what they have already educated. Activities may be widely accuracy-oriented but also has some characteristics of a fluency activity as well. "It is now very clear that fluency and accuracy are both important goals to pursue in CLT" (Brown, 2001, p,268). However, it is clear that the approach concentrates on fluency more than accuracy as oral communication is the target for most communicative lessons. With its importance on "fluency" over "accuracy," CLT has not focused enough on spelling in the EFL classrooms. Yet, error-analysis researches in the Arab World show that spelling is the most common error in the English writing of Arab students (Al-Shabbi, 1994).

In fact, most learners concentrate on accuracy rather than the communicative use of language because they are assessed by written exams. As a TEFL teacher, I would be seen as ignoring the learners' needs if I concentrate more on speaking than grammar and vocabulary. Nevertheless, the focus of fluency in the target language allows the students to be more confident when communicating with other people and they also get pleasure from talking more outside the classroom.

3. Application:

3.1 Strong Version & Weak version:

An important reason for the uncertainty about the meaning of CLT is that from the beginning, it has appeared in two different versions: strong version and weak version.

In its strong version, it is supposed that the natural processes occurring inside the learner's mind are in charge of the process of learning during CLT, and these processes cannot be managed by teachers directly (Howatt, 2004). "You learn to talk to people by actually talking to them" (Cook, 2001, p. 215). So, it has exclusive attention to meaning with no attention to form. It focuses on how students learn. Learners acquire the language easily through communication without explicit teaching. Students do not first obtain the language as a structural pattern and then learn how to use this structure in communication but rather actually find out the structure itself in the progression of learning how to communicate.

On the other hand, the aims of the CLT are similar but the means are different in the weak version. There is more control on classrooms' activities to enable students to practise communicative functions. It pays attention to both form and meaning. It suggests that learning a language is mainly based on language 'functions' (how to 'do things with words'). Learners train to practise these functions (such as 'making requests or offers') and then practising them in communicative activities through pair work, group work or role-play.

Both versions require the creative teacher of communicative activities, but the weak version tends to have more controlled learning.

I used both versions during my previous teaching, but the weak version was more effective with learners in schools as students are interested in the form more than the process if the communication and they want to learn the structure then practise it. That is because the way of examination that focuses on the form and accuracy more than oral practice or the process of production. On the other hand, the strong version is more suitable for adult learners who study the target language in private institutes; they mind fluency more than studying the structure. Thus, eliciting and practising the new functions should be before the production stage from my point of view. Our learners in the Arab world become more comfortable when they follow a pattern or a model rather than communicating freely with less control from the teacher. Regarding to one to

one tutoring, the weak version is more adequate than the strong version though many language tutors are still depending on the Grammar Translation Method claiming that it is easier for both tutors and learners as stated by most colleagues.

3.2 Using Mother Tongue

Regarding to using mother tongue in the class, the challenge is that students cannot easily transfer from a way of learning that depends on their mother tongue to a way that permits a limited use of the mother tongue to the teacher and the forbidden use of it for learners. Moreover, some teachers do not have the proficiency to speak English all the time. I do agree that using native language by the teacher should be a little permitted during any approach. However, some young learners may misunderstand the meaning of some words because the book pictures or the visual words were not clear. I remember when I asked some beginners to give me the meaning of the word "water" which was written under a picture of "a bottle of water", and some of them replied "Qarora" which means "a bottle", some pictures are sometimes vague for children and they misunderstand the meaning of them. In addition, I am expected to give the direct meaning in Arabic when students ask me about the meaning of some difficult abstract words.

3.3 The Role of Teachers

The prominence of Communication in CLT theory spotlights the presence of learners and the minimum appearance of teachers. On the one hand, learners' role is like this: "Negotiator-between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning-emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes" (Breen and Candlin 1980 cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.166), or it "is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom"(Breen and Candlin, 1980: p.99 cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.167).

3.3.1 Evaluation

According to a survey made in 144 countries, it was revealed that teachers were fairly familiar of CLT; their real classroom performance drew a gloomier image of their commitment to it. According to the survey, teachers used various activities in their classrooms. Listening to recordings was the most popular activity and there were some 'traditional' activities, such as repetition, reading aloud, grammar exercises, and memorizing words. However, 'creative' activities, such as games, songs and role play were also used by the majority. Personally, I cannot depend on such surveys as teachers' performance changes to be completely better and more perfect when it is observed (The British Council, 2011) .

The students-centred class has been proved to be very favourable in teaching. This is very clear during teachers' interviews in the Arab world. The main question is expected to be about your ability as a teacher to create a student centred lesson in a communicative way. This method is very valuable and considerable in countries like Egypt and some Arab countries where the fixed picture of teachers is the sage onstage. However, I do not agree completely with the idea that the most successful lesson is the one that is 100% students centred. In EFL classes, the teacher is the only source of information, knowledge and proficiency of the language. Therefore the teacher's talking is often useful for learners as learning is based on imitation, repetition and habit formation. Most of my talented students in English communication depended on English movies, listening to English music and playing English games to enhance their English, with great regard to the text and voice chat programmes.

One of the disadvantages is that it is difficult for the teacher alone to check the language use of every student, especially in a big class. The students are allowed to make mistakes but they need to be corrected – preferably not during the conversation - by the teacher in order to improve their performances and so as not to make the same mistake again and again. Therefore, it is not helpful if there's only one teacher for one class.

In order to overcome heavy classes, collaborative groups should be well created, teachers plan activities well giving clear instructions. Students Role-play should be designed according to the students' abilities and preferences. I once observed very fantastic example of role-play in a heavy class by a teacher, he divided a class of 40 students into four groups and each group included: a leader, scribe/ reporter/ summarizer, an artist to make visual aids, words monitor to write down the new vocabulary, actors, and a time manager. These different roles gave students a chance to practice English each according to his own role and students may exchange their roles. Nevertheless, role-play tasks and activities involve a lot of conversations among students using their native language especially in large classes. Thus the teacher may spend a lot of time on interactions of learners and he should be able to move from task to another without giving students any chance for side talks. Distributing the roles is very important to get all students involved particularly shy and introvert students, and each one's role depends on his abilities. However, it is difficult for the teacher to check every student use of language in a big class. While students are allowed to make mistakes during the practice of the language, they should be corrected at the end of a conversation so that they can improve their language and not to repeat their mistakes.

The role of a teacher in communicative activities is that "(he) will let learning take place through independent activities" (Littlewood, 1981, p.92). In schools in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, a teacher who uses such activities would be described as 'lazy', and it takes time till learners, parents and educators become more acquainted with this kind of teaching.

3.4 The Role of Learners

The learners' role is like this:

"Negotiator-between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning-emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes." One of the basic characteristics of CLT that learning in the classroom should be related to and continued outside the classroom as well (Nunan, 1991).

3.4.1 Evaluation

Learners expect the teachers to be the decision-makers; they ask for their help throughout the tasks. To be able to use communicative activities learners should be taught to take responsibility of their learning. Applying Nunan's view of the CLT characteristics is very hard in Egypt; the internet is the only way students can use English outside the classroom and most learners are not autonomous to develop their English themselves.

Assessment is the main motivator for students to engage in the activities, I have experienced this during my previous teaching in. As oral interaction is the main component of a communicative class, teachers may find it difficult to balance content and language when assessing oral tests, and in general they do not find any ready-made assessment tools for communicative proficiency.

3.4.2 Learners' Needs:

Designing syllabus according to learners' needs and motivation may be a debatable point. Learners' needs may be a professional improvement to the career, or a social travel to another country, or having some fun in the process of learning a new language. Accepting the idea that most adult learners have some motivation to learn a language, what about children and young learners in schools who have no concern in the whole learning process and are unwilling to learn? How to assess these learners' needs and design a syllabus for them? Here, the drawbacks of CLT arise. Moreover, analyzing students' needs is the responsibility of the language teacher and it needs a detailed process. However, because of the large population, teaching in Egypt and most developing countries is facing the problem of big classes with more students. The number of students in a class may exceed 50 students in government schools. It is roughly impractical for language teachers to analyze each student's need and suggest an efficient education which matches all learners' needs. Besides, such a large number of students makes individual activities in class as a very hard work because of the limit of time in class and the teacher cannot move freely in the class.

3.4.3 Cultural Conflict

Aside from these, the cultural conflicts in the CLT approach do somewhat influence its accomplishment, role changes, for example. The encouragement of individualism in the student role contradicts the idea of the dependent student whether on his teacher or his parents that prevailed for decades in the Arab world, and the equal opportunity of participation between teachers and students also contradicts traditional idea of the dominant teacher. As a result, teachers have many arguments and debates in performing the CLT in the Arab world. I think it takes time to deliver from a way of teaching to another. There should be a transition period that allows all involved in the educational process to understand and have the ability to apply new approaches of teaching.

3.5 The Teachers' Preparation and Authentic Practice

3.5.1 Use of Technology:

Teachers in Egypt are conscious of the demand for extra information and skills in the field of technology use in the EFL classroom, as well as the results from their and their learners' deficiency of technology particularly in the EFL classrooms in Egypt. Without this necessary part of teacher education, students and teachers will be left behind (England, 2007).

After this revolution of technology, it is necessary to implement a communicative teaching method not because of the type of teaching but because of the type of learners who are fond of means of communication, such as mobiles, tablets, laptops...etc.

3.5.2 Lack of Communication:

Authentic practice is another big problem in the countries where real information exchange and authentic communication situations are insufficient. The lack of communication in a real situation with native speakers of the target language slows down proficiency of fluency for both teachers and learners. In Egypt, it is rare to speak with English native speakers especially with those who live outside touristic places. So the desire to communicate in other language grows less and the interaction in a foreign language becomes retained inside the classroom. Consequently, carrying out the CLT approach is truly a hard mission in the countries with unsatisfactory situations with native speakers of the target language.

4. Conclusion

“The problem is not with the methodology itself, or with ideas that it generates, but rather with how they are amended and adapted to fit the needs of the students who come into contact with them” (Harmer, 2003, p.292) . Each method is like a coin with two faces: advantages and drawbacks. A mix of methods and activities should be done to achieve the teacher’s goal according to the learners’ age, economic and social state, level and interests. Communicative approach is the best message for students that a school is not for learning but it is a place to communicate with others so that students are encouraged to learn unconsciously. After this high development of communication technology, it is not acceptable for teachers and learners to apply a teaching method that ignores communication. Our way of learning a language depends on our understanding of what a language is and what a language does.

In spite of its critics, CLT has gained widespread acceptance in the world of language study. Teachers must strive for moderation and don’t neglect the merits of other methods. CLT, in the hands of a balanced teacher, can bring new life and joy to the classroom. Its vitality makes it an important contributor to language learning approaches.

In my opinion, teachers should actively participate in the decision-making process, rather than being mere technicians who implement only a prescribed curriculum and decisions made by others. To apply the CLT Approach, the method should be widely discussed by members of teachers, parents and students so that teachers understand the goals of the approach well and then take the training courses that help them apply it effectively. Concerning the heavy classes and lack of resources, I believe creating appropriate, attractive contexts and situations could attract the students and to be more involved in the learning process. A balanced emphasis on all language skills is desirable to develop the students’ communicative competence.

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