CHAPTER 2

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

THEORY AND FEATURES
Communicative Language Teaching: Theory and Features

The term “Communicative Language Teaching” covers a variety of approaches that focus on helping learners to communicate meaningfully in the target language. Communicative Language Teaching began in Britain in 1960s as a replacement to the earlier structural method, called Situational Language Teaching. It is the most widely accepted approach of language teaching.

The structural and functional aspects of language are characteristic features of communicative language teaching. The aim of Communicative Language Teaching is to infuse into individuals the ability to create and to construct utterances (spoken and written), which have the desired social value or purpose.

The communicative approach to language teaching starts with the theory of language as communication. The goal of language teaching is to develop “communicative
competence”. Hymes coined this term in order to contrast a communicative view of competence and Chomsky’s theory of competence.

Chomsky said:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker – listener in a completely homogenous speech community who knows its language perfectly and its unaffected by such Grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distraction, shifts of attention and interest and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.¹

For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory is to characterize the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language. Hymes held that such a view of linguistic
theory is 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 is a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. In Hymes’s view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to

Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible by virtue of the means of implementation available;
Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful in relation) to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.²

This theory of what knowing a language entails offers a much more comprehensive view than Chomsky’s view of competence, which deals primarily with abstract grammatical knowledge. Halliday has elaborated a powerful theory of the functions of language, which complements Hymes’s view of communicative competence.

Halliday describes (1975) seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their first language:

1. the instrumental function: using language to get things;
2. the regulatory function: using language to control the behaviour of others;
3. the interactional function; using language to create interaction with others;
4. the personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings;

5. the heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover;

6. the imaginative function: using language to create a world of imagination;

7. the representational function: using language to communicate information.³

Learning a second language was similarly viewed by proponents of Communicative Language Teaching as acquiring the linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions.

However, if the information that needs analysis would have provided is no longer available, on what basis are we going to identify the functions, which are widely assumed to be the units employed in organizing Communicative Language Teaching? How can we decide whether and at what point to teach people to make request, ask for permission, complain, express
disagreement and so on? If we accept that the notion of speech acts (communicative functions) provides a fundamental insight into what we are doing when we are communicating through language, is it our understanding of the implications of this insight that the content of language teaching should be predominantly seen as a selection from the total inventory of such acts? Would such an approach, of which there are certainly examples in published materials, be an adequate basis for planning the teaching of language to secondary school learners? To answer such questions we need to look again at the nature of speech act and communication.

The functional orientation in language teaching derives principally from the distinction, originally drawn by Austin, between the locutionary and illocutionary aspects of the speech act.

To know a language we need to know what these ways of performing are. Having identified the acts that need to be performed, we can teach people how to perform
them. When we say that there are ways of performing illocutionary acts, we are making some claim for generalizability so that a sentence having, or perhaps containing a certain form will normally be interpreted as performing a specific act.

When people talk of “communicating in a language” they tend to think of engaging in conversational interaction but if linguistic communication is the transmission of messages from a producer to a receiver then reading, writing and listening are equally forms of communication. Communicative Language Teaching is unbiased with regard to the four language activities. All or any of them may be presented by means of the communicative approach.

Of course, the emphasis on spoken language is not new in language teaching. Audio-visual and Audiolingual methods give priority to speech as the major aim of language teaching and both embody the belief that spoken
form of language must be acquired before written hence their designation as oral method.

A general approach, which seeks to meet this aim, may be termed a communicative teaching strategy. A communicative technique is one, which stimulates the operation of all the essential mental processes, which are carried out in the normal use of language, and does so under conditions, which resemble those that obtain in ordinary communication. In speech, for example, this means deciding what information is to be conveyed (or what other socially desired act is to be performed) finding a syntactically, lexically and phonologically appropriate form and uttering it spontaneously and fluently. This process is to be carried out under the pressure imposed by the need to communicate in real time and by the need to focus on the purpose of the communication rather than its form. The ability to perform is a matter of selecting accurately from the repertoire of language possessed by the individual at that stage (lexical, syntactic, and phonological rules etc) and carrying out the complex
linguistic tasks and sub-tasks involved in acute, temporal synchrony.

A Communicative Language Teaching strategy is likely to be successful to the extent, it includes communicative techniques of this kind.

Henry Widdowson presents his view on the communicative nature of language. In his book *Teaching Language As Communication* (1978), Widdowson brings out the relationship between linguistic systems and their communicative values in text and discourse. He focuses on the communicative acts underlying the ability to use language for different purposes. A more recent but related analysis of communicative competence is found in Canale and Swain (1980) in which four dimensions of communicative competence are identified: grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and what Hymes intends by what is “formally
possible”. It is the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity. Socio-linguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationship, the shared information of the participants and the communicative purpose for their interaction. Discourse competence refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse of text. Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies which communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communication.

At the level of language theory communicative language teaching has a rich, if somewhat eclectic, theoretical base. Some of the characteristics of this communicative view of language are as follows:

1. Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2. The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.

3. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.

4. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.⁴

Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Learning activities are consequently selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than mechanical practice of language patterns).

More recent accounts of Communicative Language Teaching, however, have attempted to describe theories of language learning processes. They are compatible with the communicative approach. Savignon (1983) surveys second language acquisition research as a source for
learning theories and considers the role of linguistics, social, cognitive and individual variables in language acquisition. Acquisition refers to the unconscious development of the target language system or a result of using the language for real communication. Learning is the conscious representation of grammatical knowledge that has resulted from instruction and it cannot lead to acquisition. It is acquired system that we call upon to create utterances during spontaneous language use. The learning system can serve only as monitor of the output of the acquired system. Krashen and other second language acquisition theorists stress that language learning comes about through using language communicatively, rather than through practicing language skills.

Johnson (1984) and Littlewood (1984) consider an alternative learning theory, which they regard as compatible with Communicative Language Teaching a skill learning model of learning.
Littlewood elucidates a cognitive and behavioral aspect:

The cognitive aspect involves the internalisation of plans for creating behaviour. For language use, these plans derive mainly from the language system they include grammatical rules, procedures for selecting vocabulary and social conventions governing speech. The behavioural aspect involves the automation of these plans so that they can be converted into fluent performance in real time. This occurs mainly through practice in converting plans into performance.⁵

The essence of Communicative Language Teaching is that it concerns itself with learners’ purposes in using language purposes and uses of language are emphasized, rather than knowledge about language.

Communicative competence was felt to be as important as grammatical competence, and socio-
linguistic and applied linguistic discussion on the context of language use, influenced the Communicative Language Teaching paradigm in language teaching. This put the emphasis further on language meaning and its use, appropriacy and fluency, as opposed to the earlier form-focused objectives of correctness, usage and practice.

The principal aim is to promote knowledge of the language system, to develop the learner’s competence by means of controlled performance. Essentially what is taught by this approach is the ability to compose correct sentences. The difficulty is that the ability to compose sentences is not the only ability we need to communicate.

Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature. This we do not communicate by composing sentences, but by using sentences to make statements of different kinds, to describe, to record, to classify and so on, or to ask questions, make requests or give orders.
At least three different theoretical views of language proficiency explicitly or implicitly inform current approaches in language teaching. The first, and the most traditional of the three is the structural view, the view that language is a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning. The target of language learning is seen to be the mastery of elements of this system, which are generally defined in terms of phonological units (e.g. phonemes), grammatical units (e.g. clauses, phrases, sentences), grammatical operations (e.g. adding, shifting, joining, or transforming elements), and lexical items (e.g. function words and structure words).

The second view of language is the functional view, the view that language is a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning. This theory emphasizes the semantic and communicative dimension rather than merely the grammatical characteristics of language and leads to a specification and organization of language teaching content by categories of meaning and function, rather
than by elements of structure and grammar. Wilkins's Notional Syllabuses (1976) is an attempt to spell out the implication of this view of language for syllabus design. A notional syllabus would include not only elements of grammar and lexis but also specify the topics, notions and concepts the learner needs to communicate about. The English for specific purposes (ESP) movement likewise begins not from a structural theory of language but from a functional account of learner needs.

The third view of language can be called the interactional view. It sees language as vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transaction between individuals. Language is seen as a tool for the creation and maintenance of social relations. Areas of inquiry being drawn on the development of interactional approaches to language teaching include interaction analysis, conversation analysis and ethno methodology. Interactional theories focus on the patterns of move acts, negotiation, and interaction found in conversational
exchanges. Language teaching content, according to this view, may be specified and organized by patterns of exchange and interaction or may be left unspecified, to be shaped by the inclinations of learners as interactors.

A learning theory underlying an approach responds to two questions:

(a) what are the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes in language learning?  (b) What are the conditions that need to be met in order for these learning processes to be activated? Learning theories associated with a method at the level of approach may emphasize either one or both of these dimensions. Process-oriented theories build on learning process, such as habit formation, induction, inferencing, hypothesis testing and generalization. Condition-oriented theories emphasize the nature of the human and physical context in which language learning takes place.

Stephen D. Krashen's monitor model of second language development (1981) is an example of learning theory on which a method has been built. Monitor theory addresses both the process and condition dimension of
learning. At the level of process, Krashen distinguishes between acquisition and learning. Acquisition refers to the natural assimilation of language rules through using language for communication. Language refers to the formal study of language rules and is a conscious process.

**The Communicative Language Teaching Paradigm:**

The Communicative Language Teaching paradigm took off in this period. Its characteristics are many. Keith Morrow (1981) lists the principles of Communicative Language Teaching as to

- Know what are you doing.
- The whole is more than the some of its parts.
- The processes are as important as their forms.
- To learn it, do it.
- Mistakes are not always mistakes.6
A brief elaboration of these points is necessary. Learners should always be learning to do something. Every lesson should end with the learner being able to see clearly that he is doing something. The focus is on relevance for the learner, where learning is seen to a purposeful end. Purpose or needs are thus important. This is what Communicative Language Teaching claims. There is also an emphasis on lying down clear communicative activities in teaching, as well as the need to focus on language skills.

Earlier, the structural approach emphasized the teaching of discreet units of grammar and of vocabulary items, which were graded and built upon, in graded blocks year by year. Structural teaching implied mastery learning (where one item is mastered before proceeding to the next). The communicative approaches however, called this a synthetic procedure, which involved the learning of forms, rather than of ways and methods of communication.
The processes are as important as their forms what Morrow implies here is the need for practising communication in the classroom. There should be some exercises by which students explore their ideas according to the given situations. It is also necessary to choose not only the ideas but also be the linguistic form for their expression. Controlled exercises and pattern drills do not allow students to practise this skill of making appropriate choices. If language is used for real purposes, the interactional element is of prime importance. What do you say in response to someone? What strategies and tactics are to be used for effective communication?

There is no point in learning the correct grammatical labels, if they are not used correctly. The emphasis is on the learning, then, on problem solving, and on tasks. Only by practising you can learn to communicate. This means that the organization of tasks is very important.

Mistakes are all part of the process of learning, which is what interlanguage studies also focus on, when it
claims that in reading towards the target language learners have to go through stages of approximation to the target language.

Earlier, structuralists, who following behaviorist principles, said that language forms could result in the learning of wrong language habits, had the focus on correct stimuli.

It is clear that Communicative Language Teaching has been influenced by sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Many arguments on grammar teaching currently held today, have been influenced by applied linguistics. Krashen (1981) for example, posits the Monitor Model, in which he distinguishes between acquisition and learning. Acquisition is the unconscious learning of the grammar of language, whereas learning is the conscious imbibing of language rules. Learning grammar consciously is useful when the learner uses this knowledge as self-check of a monitor on mistakes. Krashen also speaks of comprehensible input, which is a
concept closely related to the learning process. What does a learner bring to the task of learning, and how much of what is taught is actually comprehensible to the learner? Communicative language teaching questioned the teaching of grammar as an end in itself. Its reluctance to focus on form based teaching in fact has resulted in formal grammar not being taught in the communication classroom. Today, however, grammar teaching has comeback to its own again. It has comeback, moreover, in a different guise, informed as it is.

**Features of Communicative Language Teaching:**

There are many features of Communicative Language Teaching. Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes function, rather than form. The chief importance in Communicative Language Teaching is of meaning. Fluency rather than accuracy is emphasized. In other words, transmission of message is more important than the way it is put into words. Listening and speaking are emphasized.
The teacher's overall purpose is to prepare the learner for later communicative activity by providing him with the necessary linguistic forms and the necessary links between forms and meanings.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) describe the following major distinctive features of communicative language teaching:

1. Meaning is paramount.
2. Dialogues, if used, center on communicative functions and are not normally memorize.
3. Contextualization is a basic premise.
4. Language learning is learning to communicate.
5. Effective communication is sought.
6. Drilling may occur, but peripherally.
7. Comprehensible pronunciation is sought.
8. Any device, which helps the learners, is accepted, varying according to their age, interest, etc.

9. Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning.

10. Judicious use of native language is accepted wherever feasible.

11. Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it.

12. Reading and writing can start from the first day, if desired.

13. The target linguistic system will be learnt best through the process of struggling to communicate.

14. Communicative competence is the desired goal (i.e. the ability to use linguistic system effectively and appropriately).

15. Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methodology.
16. Sequencing is determined by any consideration of content, function or meaning, which maintain interest.

17. Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.

18. The individual often through trial and error creates language.

19. Fluency and acceptable language is the primary goal: accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in context.

20. Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writings.

21. The teacher cannot know exactly what language the student will use.

22. Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.
In communicative activities the learner’s focus is more on language forms to be learnt than on meanings to be communicated. It is impossible to state whether an individual learner sees his purpose as being primarily to communicate meanings intelligibly, to produce correct language and to do both in an equal proportion. To a large extent this will depend on how the teacher presents the activity and whether the learner expects his performance to be evaluated according to its communicative effectiveness or both. Similarly in a question and answer activity designed to practise a specific structure, the teacher may often make the learners perceive the interaction as more communicative if he responds to the content of what are they as well as its linguistic form.

Features of Communicative Language Teaching, as pointed out by Geetha Nagraj are:

1. There is no systematicity in terms of structures or teaching items and situations.
2. Problem solving activities or tasks form the main thrust of teaching items and situations.

3. In dealing with the class, the teacher controls his/her language as an adult does while taking to a child. This is known as a natural control.

4. In communicative teaching the learner has to engage with more than one language items that are required for problem solving activities at the same time.

5. Production of a language item (using the language item) need not necessarily follow the reception of it. With natural language acquisition there is a prolonged period of absorption. At some point, the learners begin to produce language relevant to the situation and this picks up rapidly.
Some important characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching are:

1. It claims to emphasize all the components of communicative competence.

2. "Function" instead of "Form" is the organizational unit of syllabus design.

3. Fluency rather than accuracy is emphasized. In other words, transmission of message is more important than the way it is put into words.

4. Use of language by the learner is encouraged in unrehearsed situations.

5. It advocates exposure to authentic material in language teaching.\(^9\)

Language learning takes place inside the learner and as, a teacher know to their frequent frustration, many aspects of it are beyond their pedagogical control. It is
likely, that many aspects of language learning can take place only through natural processes, which operates when a person involved in using the language for communication. Communicative activity (inside or outside the classroom) is an important part of the total learning process.

The emphasis in Communicative Language Teaching on the process of communication, rather than mastery of language forms, leads to different roles for learners from those found in more traditional second language classroom.

There are some more characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching:

1. Focus on communication rather than structure.

2. Emphasis on functional uses of language in different social settings.
3. Use of classroom activities that relate language forms with functions.

4. Focus on meaningful tasks.

5. Collaboration.

6. Purposeful interaction.  

The functions of Communicative Language Teaching emphasize the effective communication skills. Effective communication takes place when situations are given to the learners and they try to communicate according to the situations in the classroom and also implement it into the real life situations. The teacher for effective communication and to take part in communicative activities motivates learners. The teacher exactly does not know what language student will use in the given context. Students are expected to be fluent as well as accurate to some extent. The Communicative Language Teaching is learner-centered. The learner attempts to communicate and continues to do so. The situations in which the learner attempts to communicate are sufficiently frequent. In these situations the learner is able to understand, at
least, some of what he hears or reads; that is, he is able to relate sounds or symbols to meanings.

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes all the four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing, but listening and speaking have special place in Communicative Language Teaching. Communicative competence has special importance more than linguistic competence in Communicative Language Teaching.
References:


