10 Communicative Language Teaching in the twenty-first century: the 'Principled Communicative Approach'

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Introduction

Earl Stevick has always been interested in improving language teaching methodology, and he has never been afraid of innovation. His seminal work, *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways* (Stevick 1980), introduced many of us to Counselling-Learning and Suggestopedia for the first time, and in *Memory, Meaning and Method: A View of Language Teaching.* (Stevick 1996) he discussed a wide range of theoretical and practical considerations to help us better understand the intricate cognitive and interpersonal processes whereby a language is acquired and then used for meaningful communication. The proposal in this chapter to revitalize Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the light of contemporary scholarly advances is fully within the spirit of Earl's approach.[1]

By the turn of the new millennium, CLT had become a real buzzword in language teaching methodology, but the extent to which the term covers a well-defined and uniform teaching method is highly questionable. In fact, since the genesis of CLT in the early 1970s, its proponents have developed a very wide range of variants that were only loosely related to each other (for overviews, see Savignon 2005; Spada 2007). In this chapter I first look at the core characteristics of CLT to explore the roots of the diverse interpretations and then argue that in order for CLT to fulfil all the expectations attached to it in the twenty-first century, the method needs to be revised according to the latest findings of psycholinguistic research. I will conclude the chapter by outlining the main principles of a proposed revised approach that I have termed the 'Principled Communicative Approach' (PCA).

The traditional communicative approach

Communicative Language Teaching was introduced at the beginning of the 1970s by British and American scholars to promote the teaching of usable communicative skills in L2 instruction. Although it was seen by many as a counter-reaction to the Audiolingual method that dominated the 1960s, the main goal of CLT – to develop a functional communicative L2 competence in the learners – was actually similar to the primary audiolingual objective. However, CLT pursued the communicative agenda in a radically different manner. Instead of the audiolingual attempt of trying to build up an implicit L2 knowledge base through drilling and memorization,[2] CLT methodology was centred around the learner's participatory experience in meaningful L2 interaction in (often simulated) communicative situations, which underscored the significance of less structured and more creative language tasks. For this reason, the learning of scripted dialogues was replaced by games, problem-solving tasks and unscripted situational role plays, and pattern drilling was either completely abandoned or replaced by 'communicative drills'.

At the heart of the Audiolingual/CLT difference lay a basic contrast in orientation: audiolingualism was associated with a specific learning theory – behaviourism – and therefore it was the first language teaching method that consciously aspired to build on the principles of the psychology of learning, whereas the communicative reform in the 1970s was centred around the radical renewal of the linguistic course content without any systematic psychological conception to guide the actual process of learning to accompany it. This is well illustrated by the fact that while the linguistic content of communicative syllabuses was informed by a number of cutting-edge theoretical strands, such as Austin (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory, Hymes' (1972) model of communicative competence and its application to L2 proficiency by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), as well as Halliday's (1985) systemic functional grammar, the only learning-specific principle that was available for CLT materials developers and practitioners was the broad tenet of 'learning through doing', coupled with the only marginally less ambiguous guideline of developing the learners' communicative competence through their active participation in *seeking situational meaning*. Thus, the conception underlying learning within CLT was confined to the widespread assumption that the

[2] Of course, audiolingualism was more complex than that, but a broad characterization is sufficient for the current discussion; for more details, see Castagnaro (2006) and Dörnyei (2009).

learners' communicative competence develops automatically through their active participation in meaningful communicative tasks.

The vagueness of the 'seeking situational meaning' tenet, in turn, resulted in a very wide range of variants of CLT in terms of actual classroom application in both the UK and the USA. Richards and Rodgers (2001: 155) have rightly pointed out in respect of CLT that 'There is no single text or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative.' As one extreme, for example, people often associate CLT with a strictly-no-grammar approach, epitomized by Krashen's (1985) *The Input Hypothesis*. In contrast, some of the founders of CLT were quite keen to emphasize a salient structural linguistic component, as illustrated, for example, by the starting sentence of Littlewood's (1981: 1) highly influential teaching methodology text: 'One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view.' These contrasting stances – referred to by Thornbury (1999) as 'shallow-end' and 'deep-end' approaches, respectively – correspond to the psychological distinction of *implicit* versus *explicit learning*, and because this distinction will play a central role in conceiving the PCA, let me elaborate on it.

Implicit versus explicit language learning

Explicit learning refers to the learner's conscious and deliberate attempt to master some material or solve a problem. This is the learning type emphasized by most school instruction. In contrast, *implicit learning* involves acquiring skills and knowledge without conscious awareness, that is, automatically and with no conscious attempt to learn them. Amongst language teachers, the emerging view of a typical communicative classroom has been that it should approximate a naturalistic language acquisition environment as closely as possible, thereby providing plenty of authentic input to feed the students' implicit learning processes. This view was partly motivated by the fact that the main language learning model for humans – the mastery of our mother tongue – predominantly involves implicit processes without any explicit teaching: children acquire the complex system of their L1 through engaging in natural and meaningful communication with their parents and other caretakers.

Unfortunately, the problem with implicit language learning is that while it does such a great job in generating native-speaking L1 proficiency in infants, it does not seem to work efficiently when we want to master an L2 at a later stage in our lives. This is regrettable, but the

fact is that – alas! – untutored learning through simple exposure to natural language input does not seem to lead to sufficient progress in L2 attainment for most school learners. Strong evidence for this claim has come from two main sources (for a detailed discussion, see Dörnyei 2009): (a) experiences in educational contexts – particularly in immersion programmes – that provide optimal conditions for implicit learning and yet which typically fail to deliver native-like L2 proficiency; and (b) reviews of empirical studies that specifically compared implicit and explicit instruction, which demonstrate a significant advantage of explicit types of L2 instruction over implicit types (for a seminal paper in this regard, see Norris and Ortega 2000).

Thus, the available evidence confirms Lightbown and Spada's (2006: 176) conclusion that 'we do not find support for the hypothesis that language acquisition will take care of itself if second language learners simply focus on meaning in comprehensible input'. In other words, mere exposure to L2 input accompanied by communicative practice is not sufficient, and, therefore, we need explicit learning procedures – such as focus on form or some kind of controlled practice – to push learners beyond communicatively effective language towards target-like second language ability. Ellis (2007: 26) summarizes the overall consensus amongst scholars as follows:

> As with other implicit modules, when automatic capabilities fail, there follows a call for recruiting additional collaborative conscious support: We only think about walking when we stumble, about driving when a child runs into the road, and about language when communication breaks down. In unpredictable conditions, the capacity of consciousness to organize existing knowledge in new ways is indispensable.

It is important to emphasize here that the search for ways of reintegrating explicit learning processes in modern language teaching methodology does not mean that we should regard these processes as replacements of implicit learning. Instead, the real challenge is to maximize the *cooperation* of explicit and implicit learning; accordingly, as will be illustrated below, finding ways of meeting this challenge has been the main driving force of developing the PCA.

The ongoing transformation of CLT

As we saw above, relying on a purely implicit learning approach has turned out to be less than successful in L2 learning in general, and therefore the past decade has seen a gradual transformation of our idealized CLT image. In her summary of this shift, Nina Spada (2007: 271) explains

that 'most second language educators agree that CLT is undergoing a transformation – one that includes increased recognition of and attention to language form within exclusively or primarily meaning-oriented CLT approaches to second language instruction'. It was in this vein that in 1997 Marianne Celce-Murcia, Sarah Thurrell and I suggested (Celce-Murcia et al. 1997, 1998) that CLT had reached a new phase that we termed the 'Principled Communicative Approach':

> In sum, we believe that CLT has arrived at a turning point: Explicit, direct elements are gaining significance in teaching communicative abilities and skills. The emerging new approach can be described as a principled communicative approach; by bridging the gap between current research on aspects of communicative competence and actual communicative classroom practice, this approach has the potential to synthesize direct, knowledge-oriented and indirect, skill-oriented teaching approaches. Therefore, rather than being a complete departure from the original, indirect practice of CLT, it extends and further develops CLT methodology.
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> (Celce-Murcia et al. 1997: 147–8)

As we emphasized, the increasing directness of the emerging principled CLT could not be equated with a back-to-grammar tendency. Rather, it involved an attempt to extend the systematic treatment of language issues traditionally restricted to sentence-bound rules (i.e. grammar) to the explicit development of other knowledge areas and skills necessary for efficient communication. Looking back, I can see that although we did highlight the need to integrate direct, knowledge-oriented (i.e. explicit) and indirect, skill-oriented (i.e. implicit) teaching approaches, we could have gone further in underlining the need to complement the proposed new linguistic content with an awareness of the psychological dimension of learning. It seems to me that this search for integration has been the most fruitful direction of language teaching methodology in the new millennium, with the most forward-pointing developments in research targeting the various modes of the explicit–implicit interface taking place in three central areas: (a) *focus on form* and *form-focused instruction*; (b) *fluency* and *automatization*; and (c) *formulaic language*. All three areas have extensive literatures raising complex issues. Here I will offer a brief sketch of the key topics.

Focus on form (FonF) and form-focused instruction (FFI)

Focus on form (FonF) and form-focused instruction (FFI) indicate a concern with the structural system of language from a communicative perspective. In other words, they represent a halfway position between a concern for communicative meaning and the linguistic features of the language code, calling for a primarily meaning-focused instruction in

which some degree of attention is paid to form. Thus, FonF/FFI refer to a new type of grammar instruction that intends to remain fully compatible with communicative principles in that it foregrounds the meaning-focused and personally significant nature of language tasks, and in that sense this approach is a prime example of trying to implement the explicit–implicit interface in actual classroom practice. One of the main proponents of the approach, Rod Ellis (2008), has drawn up the following comprehensive framework of the various form-focused options, distinguishing four macro-options:

- *Input-based options* involve the manipulation of the language input that learners are exposed to or are required to process. The main types of this macro-option are *input flooding* (input that contains an artificially increased number of examples of the target structure), *enhanced input* (input in which the target feature is made salient to the learners in some way, e.g. by highlighting it visually in a text), and *structured input* (input that the learner is forced to process in order to be able to provide a required follow-up response, e.g. ticking an answer option in an opinion survey).
- *Explicit options* involve instruction that can be direct (learners are provided with metalinguistic descriptions of the target feature, e.g. in deductive instruction) or indirect (learners are provided with data illustrating the target feature and are required to 'discover' the rule for themselves, e.g. in inductive instruction).
- *Production options* involve instruction geared at enabling and inducing learners to produce utterances containing the target structure. This type can be further subdivided in terms of whether it involves text-manipulation (e.g. fill-in-the-blank exercises) or text-creation.
- *Corrective feedback options* involve either implicit feedback (e.g. recasts or clarification requests) or explicit correction (e.g. metalinguistic explanation or elicitation), and we can also distinguish between feedback that is input-providing (e.g. recasts or metalinguistic explanation) or output-prompting (e.g. requests for clarification or elicitation).

Fluency and automatization

Everybody who has ever tried to speak in a foreign language knows that the accurate use of linguistic form is not the only, and often not even the most serious, concern with regard to communicative effectiveness. In many respects L2 *fluency* is equally, if not more, important. In the psychological literature, fluency is discussed under the broader concept of 'automaticity/automatization', and the promotion of fluency

is usually subsumed under 'skill learning theory'. Thus, from a psychological point of view, the relevant issue to explore is how L2 skills can be automatized.

Skill learning theory proposes the following basic sequence: automatization requires implicit (or *procedural*) knowledge, which in turn requires initial explicit (or *declarative*) input and conscious consecutive practice. Accordingly, a systematically designed fluency-building task will include an initial *declarative input stage* and subsequent *extended practice*, which can be further divided into *controlled practice* and *open-ended practice* (for more details, see Anderson 2000; DeKeyser 2007; Ranta and Lyster 2007):

- The *declarative input stage* is to provide clear and concise rules and sufficient examples that the learner can then interpret and rehearse, thereby raising awareness of and internalizing the skill.
- The *controlled practice stage* should offer opportunities for abundant repetition within a narrow context that still maintains personal significance and communicative meaningfulness (e.g. administering a verbal opinion survey to a group of people in which everybody has to be asked the same questions). Therefore, the key to the effectiveness of this stage is to design interesting drills that are not demotivating (see Dörnyei 2001; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2010) and which are related to some communicative function. The most elaborate operationalization of this stage is offered by the 'creative automatisation' tasks of Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, 2005).
- The *open-ended practice stage* involves the continuous improvement in the performance of a skill that is already well established in a wider and wider applicability range. In spite of the unscripted, free nature of this phase, it can still benefit from some added explicit focus, for example by highlighting some L2 functions associated with a list of specific phrases as specific targets for practice.

Interestingly, this *declarative input → controlled practice → open-ended practice* sequence is reminiscent of the well-known methodological progression of *presentation → practice → production* (PPP).

Formulaic language

There is something fundamental about *formulaic language* such as lexical phrases, idioms, conventionalized expressions, collocations, etc. (for overviews, see Schmitt 2004; Wray 2008). Widdowson (1989: 135), for example, argued that 'communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules ... It is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks', and indeed

many would agree with him that competent speakers of a language are in command of thousands (if not tens of thousands) of language chunks, and use them as basic building blocks in their speech and writing. With his 'idiom principle', Sinclair (1991: 112) also underscores the important role idioms (formulaic sequences) play in discourse. As he concludes, 'The overwhelming nature of this evidence leads us to elevate the principle of idiom from being a rather minor feature, compared with grammar, to being at least as important as grammar in the explanation of how meaning arises in text.'

It is important to note that formulaic language competence is directly linked to automatized, fluent language production. It has been traditionally assumed that formulaic sequences are stored in the memory as single units and therefore their retrieval is cognitively of a relatively undemanding nature. This in turn allows the speaker to attend to other aspects of communication and to plan larger pieces of discourse, which would naturally facilitate fluent language production under real-time conditions.

There has been relatively little research on how to teach formulaic language in classroom contexts; however, things have started to change and some important studies have been published on the classroom practice of promoting chunks and formulaic sequences (e.g. Gatbonton and Segalowitz 2005; Boers et al. 2006; Taguchi 2007; Lindstromberg and Boers 2008). The most principled attempt to develop a coherent approach for the promotion of formulaic sequences has been made by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, 2005); their proposed methodology is called ACCESS, standing for 'Automatization in Communicative Contexts of Essential Speech Segments', and it offers a principled adaptation of CLT that aims to generate fluency by drawing on the theories of automatization and formulaic language.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the real challenge for language teaching methodology is to specify the nature of the optimal cooperation between explicit and implicit learning processes in a principled manner. Working out the details of a new Principled Communicative Approach is clearly an ongoing process, but we can formulate some key guiding principles based on the available research for the approach. I would like to conclude by offering seven key – and somewhat overlapping – principles that are in accordance with the state of the art of our research knowledge of instructed second language acquisition.

The personal significance principle. PCA should be *meaning-focused* and *personally significant* as a whole. This has been the basic tenet of

student-centred CLT, and I believe that this principle is just as valid now as when it was first formulated.

The controlled practice principle. While the overall purpose of language learning is to prepare the learners for meaningful communication, skill learning theory suggests that – similar to the training of musicians or athletes – it should also include *controlled practice activities* to promote the automatization of L2 skills. The purpose of this practice should be clearly explained to the learners and the content/format should be made as motivating as possible within the tasks' inherent constraints.

The declarative input principle. To provide jump starts for subsequent automatization, PCA should contain *explicit initial input* components. This declarative input can be offered in several ways, including the potential utilization of accelerated learning techniques and rote learning.

The focus-on-form principle. While maintaining an overall meaning-oriented approach, PCA should also pay attention to the *formal/structural aspects* of the L2 that determine accuracy and appropriateness at the linguistic, discourse and pragmatic levels. An important hallmark of good teaching is finding the *optimal balance* between implicit and explicit instruction through administering a good mixture of meaning-based and form-focused activities in the dynamic classroom context.

The formulaic language principle. PCA should include the teaching of *formulaic language* as a featured component. There should be sufficient awareness raising of the significance and pervasiveness of formulaic language in real-life communication, and selected phrases should be practised and recycled intensively.

The language exposure principle. PCA should offer learners *extensive exposure to large amounts of L2 input* that can feed the learners' implicit learning mechanisms. In order to make the most of this exposure, learners should be given some explicit preparation in terms of *pre-task activities* (e.g. pre-reading/listening/watching tasks or explanations of some salient aspects of the material) to prime them for maximum intake.

The focused interaction principle. PCA should offer learners ample opportunities to participate in *genuine L2 interaction*. For best effect, such communicative practice should always have a specific formal or functional focus and should always be associated with target phrases to practise.

In sum, the essence of the Principled Communicative Approach (PCA) that I am advocating is the creative integration of meaningful communication with relevant declarative input and the automatization of both linguistic rules and lexical items. In instructed second language acquisition, *the more is not merrier if it is not focused.*

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