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Communicative Curriculum Design for the 21st Century

"YOU MAY NOT LOITER DOWNTOWN IN ICE CREAM STORES. You may not ride in a carriage or automobile with any man unless he is your father or brother. You may not dress in bright colors. You must wear at least two petticoats. You must start the fire at 7 a.m. so the school room will be warm by 8 a.m."

1915 Rules for Teachers

Goodland, Kansas

What do you think of the 1915 Rules for Teachers? Do they seem somewhat strange or outdated? Do they make you smile? If you had been a talented new teacher in Goodland, Kansas in 1915, you most likely would have found these rules to be the mark of a school system with high standards. No doubt the standards set for students were as high as those set for teachers. Teachers in Goodland could count on students to be respectful and diligent in their work. Teachers, for their part, were expected to set a good example.

Teachers have always been expected to set a good example for learners, to provide a model of behavior. But as these rules from 1915 so clearly remind us, the model can and does change. What seems a good example in one time or place, a given *context of situation*, may seem quite strange or inappropriate in another time or place. And so it is with language teaching. Teachers have found many ways or methods for teaching languages. All have been admired models in some time or place, but perhaps have been ridiculed or dismissed in other contexts. Times change, fashions change. What may once appear new and promising can subsequently seem curious or inappropriate.

Within the last quarter century, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been put forth around the world as the new and innovative way to teach English as a second or foreign language. Teaching materials, course descriptions, and curriculum guidelines proclaim a goal of communicative competence. In Japan, for example, the guidelines published by the Ministry of Education in The Course of Study for Senior High School state the following objectives of ELT: "To develop students' ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language; to foster students' positive attitude towards communicating in a foreign language; and to heighten their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding" (Wada 1994:1). A senior advisor to the Ministry in promoting ELT reform in Japan, Wada (in press) explains the significance of these guidelines:

> The Course of Study is one of the most important legal precepts in the Japanese educational system. It establishes national standards for elementary and secondary schools…. For the first time it introduced into English education at both secondary school levels the concept of communicative competence.... The basic goal of the revision [is] to prepare students to cope with the rapidly occurring changes toward a more global society.

Parallel efforts are under way in Taiwan for similar reasons. Based on in-depth interviews of teacher educators, Wang (in press) reports on the progress:

> Much has been done to meet the demand for competent English users and effective teaching in Taiwan. Current improvements, according to the teacher experts, include the change in entrance examinations, the new curriculum with a goal of teaching for communicative competence, and the island-wide implementation in 2001 of English education in the elementary schools. However, more has to be done to ensure quality teaching and learning in the classrooms. Based on the teacher experts' accounts, further improvements can be stratified into three interrelated levels related to teachers, school authorities, and the government. Each is essential to the success of the other efforts.

How has CLT been interpreted?

By definition, CLT puts the focus on the learner. Learners' communicative needs provide a framework for elaborating program goals in terms of functional competence. This implies global, qualitative evaluation of learner achievement as opposed to quantitative assessment of discrete linguistic features. Controversy over appropriate language testing measures persists, and many a curricular innovation has been undone by failure to make corresponding changes in evaluation. Current efforts at educational reform favor essay writing, in-class presentations, and other more holistic assessments of learner competence. Some programs have initiated portfolio assessment in an effort to better represent and encourage learner achievement.

Although it now has a new name and is enjoying widespread recognition and research attention, CLT is not a new idea. Throughout the long history of language teaching there always have been advocates of a focus on meaning, as opposed to form, and of developing learner ability to actually use the language for communication. The more immediate the communicative needs, the more readily communicative methods seem to be adopted. In *Breaking Tradition*, Musumeci (1997) provides a fascinating account of language teaching reform efforts dating back to the Middle Ages when Latin was the lingua franca. The book is a favorite of my students, who find it a refreshing and reassuring reminder that discussions of methods and goals for language teaching by far predate the 21st century.

Depending upon their own preparation and experience, teachers themselves differ in their reactions to CLT. Some feel understandable frustration at the seeming ambiguity in discussions of communicative ability. Negotiation of meaning may be a lofty goal, but this view of language behavior lacks precision and does not provide a universal scale for assessment of individual learners. Ability is viewed as variable and highly dependent upon context and purpose as well as on the roles and attitudes of all involved. Some teachers welcome the opportunity to select and develop their own materials, and thereby provide their learners with a range of communicative tasks. Also they are comfortable relying on more global, integrative judgments of learner progress.

Shaping a communicative curriculum

In attempting to convey the meaning of CLT to both pre-service and in-service teachers of English as a second or foreign language in a wide range of contexts, I have found it helpful to think of a communicative curriculum as potentially composed of five components. These components may be regarded as thematic clusters of activities or experiences related to language use, which provide a useful way of categorizing teaching strategies. Use of the term *component* to categorize these activities seems particularly appropriate in that it avoids any suggestion of sequence or hierarchy. Experimentation with communicative teaching methods has shown that all five components can be profitably blended at all stages of instruction. Organization of learning activities into these components serves not to sequence an ELT program, but rather to highlight the range of options available in curriculum planning and to suggest ways in which their very interrelatedness benefits the learner. The five components are:

1. Language Arts
2. Language for a Purpose
3. My Language is Me: Personal English Language Use
4. You Be…, I'll Be…: Theater Arts
5. Beyond the Classroom

Language Arts

Language arts, or language analysis, is the first component on the list. Language arts includes those things that language teachers often do best. In fact, it may be all they have been taught to do. Language arts includes many of the exercises used in mother tongue programs to focus attention on formal accuracy. In communicative ELT, language arts focuses on forms of English, including syntax, morphology, and phonology. Familiar activities such as translation, dictation, and rote memorization can be helpful in bringing attention to form. Vocabulary expansion can be enhanced by a focus on definitions, synonyms and antonyms, and where applicable, true and false cognates. Spelling tests, for example, are important if writing is a goal. Pronunciation exercises and patterned repetition of verb paradigms, accompanied by an explanation of morphosyntactic features, can be useful in focusing on form. There are also many language arts games that learners of all ages enjoy for the variety and group interaction they provide. So long as they are not overused and are not promoted as the solution to all types of language learning problems, language arts games can be found in a wide range of formats and are a welcome addition to a teacher's repertoire.

Language for a Purpose

Language for a purpose, or language experience, is the second component on the list. In contrast to language analysis, language experience is the use of English for real and immediate communicative goals. Not all learners are learning English for the same reasons. Attention to the specific communicative needs of the learners is important in the selection and sequencing of materials. Regardless of how distant or unspecific the communicative needs of the learners may be, every program with a goal of communicative competence should give attention to opportunities for meaningful English use, to opportunities to focus on meaning rather than on form.

In an ESL setting, where English is the language outside the classroom, there is an immediate and natural need for learners to use English. Where this happens, purposeful language use is a built-in feature of the learning environment. In an EFL setting, where the teacher may have a language other than English in common with learners, special attention needs to be given to providing opportunities for English language experience. Exclusive use of English in the classroom is an option. In content-based instruction, the focus is other than the English language. The content is taught through the use of English. Immersion programs at the elementary, secondary, or even university level, where the entire curriculum is taught in English, offer a maximum amount of purposeful language use (see Snow 2001). In addition, task-based curricula are designed to provide learners with maximum opportunity to use language for a purpose.

Learners who are accustomed to being taught exclusively in their mother tongue may at first be uncomfortable if the teacher speaks to them in English, expecting them not only to understand but perhaps even to respond. When this happens, teachers need to take special care to help learners understand that they are not expected to understand every word, any more than they are expected to express themselves in native-like English. Making an effort to get the gist and using strategies to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning, are important to the development of communicative competence. For learners who are accustomed to grammar translation courses taught in their mother tongue with an emphasis on grammar and accuracy, the transition will not be easy. Kusano Hubbell (in press), a Japanese teacher of English in Tokyo, recounts some struggles in her determined effort to teach communicatively:

> Many Japanese students have been taught that they have to know every word in a sentence or a phrase in order to understand a foreign language. They are not taught to use the strategies that they already use in their native Japanese, that is, to guess the meaning from the context. When the blackboard is full of writing and I am busy in class, I tell a student, "Please erase the blackboard!", handing him an eraser and pointing to the dirty blackboard. If he does not move, it is not because he is offended. He just did not recognize the word "erase," and to him that means he did not understand me. If he is willing to accept the ambiguity, he gets up and cleans the board.

With encouragement and help from their teacher in developing the strategic competence they need to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning, learners express satisfaction and even surprise. Kusano Hubbell (in press) goes on to report the positive reactions she receives at the end of the term:

- "Completely different from any class I've ever had!"
- "I have never expressed my own ideas in English before. Work was always to translate this section, to fill in the blanks or read. It was all passive."
- "In my career of English education from junior high to cram school there was no teacher who spoke English other than to read the textbooks."

My Language is Me: Personal English Language Use

Personal English language use, the third component in a communicative curriculum, relates to the learner's emerging identity in English. Learner attitude is, without a doubt, the single most important factor in learner success. Whether the motivations of a learner are integrative or instrumental, the development of communicative competence involves the whole learner. The most successful teaching programs are those that take into account the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of language learning. They seek to involve learners psychologically as well as intellectually.

In planning for CLT, teachers should remember that not everyone is comfortable in the same role. Within classroom communities, as within society at large, there are leaders and there are followers. Both are essential to the success of group activities. In group discussions, there are always some who seem to do the most talking. Often, those who remain silent in larger groups participate more readily in pair work, or they may prefer to work on an individual project. The wider the variety of communicative, or meaning-based, activities, the greater the chance for involving all learners.

Personal language use implies, above all, respect for learners as they use English for self-expression. Although language arts activities provide an appropriate context for attention to formal accuracy, personal English language use does not. Most teachers know this and intuitively focus on meaning rather than form as learners express their personal feelings or experiences. Many textbooks and tests emphasize structural accuracy, however, so teachers may feel uncomfortable when they do not attend to those non-native-like utterances that do not impede the conveyance of meaning. An understanding of the importance of opportunities for the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning in CLT and of the distinction between language arts and personal language use can help to reassure teachers that the communicative practice they are providing is important for learners.

Respect for learners as they use English for self-expression requires more than simply restraint when they make formal errors that do not interfere with meaning. Respect requires recognition that so-called "native-like" performance may not, in fact, even be a goal for learners. Language teaching has come a long way from audio-lingual days when "native" pronunciation and use was held up as an ideal for learners. Reference to the terms *native* or *native-like* in the evaluation of communicative competence is inappropriate in today's post-colonial, multicultural world where nonnative speakers of English outnumber native speakers by at least two to one, a ratio that is rapidly increasing. We now recognize that native speakers are never "ideal" and, in fact, vary widely in range and style of communicative abilities, especially as the English language is increasingly used as a language of global communication. Moreover, the decision of what is or is not one's native language is arbitrary and irrelevant for ELT and is perhaps best left to the individual concerned.

Since a personality inevitably takes on a new dimension through expression in another language, it needs to discover that dimension on its own terms. Learners should not only be given the opportunity to say what they want to say in English, they should be encouraged to develop an English language personality with which they are comfortable. They may feel more comfortable maintaining a degree of formality not found in the interpersonal transactions of native speakers. The diary entry of a Japanese learner of English offers important insight on the matter of identity:

> I just don't know what to do right now. I might have been *wrong* since I began to learn English; I always tried to be better and wanted to be a good speaker. It was *wrong, absolutely wrong!* When I got to California, I started imitating Americans and picked up the words that I heard. So my English became just like Americans. I couldn't help it. I must have been funny to them, because I am a Japanese and have my own culture and background. I think I almost lost the most important thing I should not have. I got California English, including intonation, pronunciation, the way they act, which *are not* mine. I have to have *my own* English, be myself when I speak English. (Preston 1981:113).

On the other hand, learners may discover a new freedom of self-expression in their new language. When asked what it is like to write in English, a language that is not her native tongue, the Korean novelist Mia Yun (1998) replied that it was "like putting on a new dress." Writing in English made her feel fresh, see herself in a new way, offered her freedom to experiment. When expressing themselves in a new language, writers are not the only ones to experience the feeling of "putting on a new dress." Personal language use calls for recognition and respect for the individual personality of the learner.

You Be…, I'll Be…: Theater Arts

Theater Arts constitutes the fourth component of a

communicative curriculum. In the familiar words of Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, II, 7), "All the world is a stage." And on this stage we play many roles for which we improvise scripts from the models we observe around us. Child, parent, sister, brother, employer, employee, doctor or teacher—all are roles that include certain expected ways of behaving and using language according to sociocultural rules of appropriateness. Familiar roles may be played with little conscious attention to style. On the other hand, new and unfamiliar roles require practice, with an awareness of how the meanings we intend are being interpreted by others. Sometimes there are no models. In the last half of the 20th century, women who suddenly found themselves in what traditionally had been men's roles, whether as firefighters, professors, or CEOs, had to adapt existing models to ones with which they could be comfortable. And the transition is far from complete. By the end of the 21st century women will no doubt have many models.

If the world can be thought of as a stage, with actors and actresses who play their parts, theater may be seen as an opportunity to experiment with roles, to try things out. Fantasy and play-acting are a natural and important part of childhood. Make-believe improvisations familiar to children the world over are important to self-discovery and growth. They allow young learners to experiment, to try things out, like hats and wigs, moods and postures, gestures and words. As occasions for language use, role-playing and the many related activities that constitute theater arts are likewise a natural component of language learning. They allow learners to experiment with the roles they play or may be called upon to play in real life. Theater arts can provide learners with the tools they need to act, that is, to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning in a new language. Activities can include both scripted and unscripted role play, simulations, and even pantomime. Ensemble-building activities familiar in theater training have been used very successfully in ELT to create a climate of trust so necessary for the incorporation of theater arts activities. The role of the teacher in these activities is that of a coach who provides support, strategies, and encouragement for learners as they explore new ways of being.

Beyond the Classroom

Beyond the Classroom is the fifth and final component of a communicative curriculum. Regardless of the variety of communicative activities in the ESL/EFL classroom, their purpose remains to prepare learners to use English in the world beyond. This is the world upon which learners will depend for the maintenance and development of their communicative competence once classes are over. The classroom is but a rehearsal. Development of opportunities for English language use beyond those offered in the classroom itself often begins with an identification of learner's interests and needs.

As a child, I looked forward to receiving letters from my pen pals. They would arrive bearing colorful stamps from France, Wales, Japan, Taiwan, and Australia. I had yet to learn a second language, so all our correspondence was in English. However, this regular exchange of letters put a small-town midwestern American girl in touch with other places around the globe and with other users of English. Technology has since brought the whole world so much closer. English language radio and television programs, videos, and feature-length films are readily available in many EFL settings, along with newspapers and magazines. English-speaking residents or visitors may be available to visit the classroom. The Internet now provides opportunities to interact with English-speaking peers on a variety of topics and to develop grammatical, discourse, sociocultural, and strategic competence. In addition to prearranged exchanges, learners can check World Wide Web sites for an almost infinite range of information. These opportunities for computer-mediated communication will increase dramatically in the years ahead.

Putting it all together

How do we put it all together? Is there an optimum combination of language arts, personal language use, language for a purpose, theater arts, and language use beyond the classroom? These questions must be answered by individual teachers for their learners in the context where they teach. Cultural expectations, language goals, and learning styles are but some of the ways in which learners may differ from one another. To the complexity of the learner must be added the complexities of teachers and of the settings in which they teach. Established routines, or institutional belief about what is important, weigh heavily in a teacher's decisions as to what and how to teach and often make innovation difficult. Finally, the need for variety must be taken into account. Learners who are bored with rule recitation or sentence translation may just as easily lose interest in games or role playing if these activities become routine. Difficult as it is, the teacher's task is to understand the many factors involved and respond to them creatively.

Teachers cannot do this alone, of course. They need the support of administrators, the community, and learners themselves. Methodologists and teacher educators have a responsibility as well. They should provide classroom teachers with the perspective and experiences they need to respond to the realities of their world, a changing world in which the old ways of language teaching may not be the best ways. The optimum combination of the analytical and the experiential in ESL/EFL for a given context is the focus of ongoing research. A now well-established research tradition in second/foreign language learning/teaching has clearly shown the importance of attention to language use, or experience, in addition to language analysis. Unfortu-

nately the overwhelming emphasis in many school programs is on the latter, often to the complete exclusion of the former.

What about grammar?

Discussions of CLT not infrequently lead to questions of grammatical or formal accuracy. The perceived shift in attention from morphosyntactic features to a focus on meaning has led in some cases to the impression that grammar is not important, or that proponents of CLT favor learner self-expression without regard to form. While involvement in communicative events is seen as central to language development, this involvement necessarily requires attention to form. The contribution to language development of both form-focused and meaning-focused classroom activities remains a question in ongoing research. The optimum combination of these activities in any given instructional setting depends no doubt on learner age, nature and length of instructional sequence, opportunities for language contact outside the classroom, and teacher preparation, among other factors. However, for the development of communicative ability, research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience. Grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences.

Communicative language teaching does not necessarily mean the rejection of familiar materials. A teacher with only a grammar-translation textbook can use it to support a focus on communication. Conversely, there is nothing to prevent materials intended to promote communication from being used to teach grammar and translation. What matters is the teacher's understanding of how language learning happens. The basic principle involved is an orientation towards collective participation in a process of use and discovery achieved by cooperation between learners as well as between learners and the teacher.

What CLT is not

Disappointment with both grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods for their inability to prepare learners for the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning, along with enthusiasm for an array of alternative methods labeled communicative, has resulted in uncertainty as to what are the essential features of CLT. So let me conclude this overview with a brief mention of what CLT is *not*.

1. CLT is not exclusively concerned with face to face oral communication. The principles of CLT apply equally to reading and writing activities that engage readers and writers in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning. The goals of CLT depend on learner needs in a given context.

2. CLT does not require small group or pair work. Group tasks have been found helpful in many contexts as a way of providing increased opportunity and motivation for communication. However, classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature and may well be inappropriate in some contexts.

3. Finally, CLT does not exclude a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness.

The essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. Terms sometimes used to refer to features of CLT include *process-oriented, task-based,* and *inductive* or *discovery-oriented*. CLT cannot be found in any single textbook or set of curricular materials. In keeping with the notion of context of situation, CLT is properly seen as an approach, or theory of intercultural communicative competence to be used in developing materials and methods appropriate to a given context of learning. Contexts change. The world of carriages and petticoats evolved into one of genomes and cyberspace. Communicative language teaching methods designed to enhance the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning will also continue to be explored and adapted.

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