

# ***Some misconceptions about communicative language teaching***

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*Although communicative language teaching is accepted by many applied linguists and teachers as the most effective approach among those in general use, there are still a number of misconceptions about what it involves. This article sets out four of the main misconceptions, discusses why they have arisen, and why they can be so described. In doing this, the article attempts to define some important characteristics of communicative language teaching as it is practised at present.*

**Introduction** Whatever the situation may be as regards actual teaching practices, communicative language teaching (CLT) is well established as the dominant theoretical model in ELT. There have been recurrent attempts to take stock of CLT and to identify its characteristic features (e.g. Richards and Rodgers 1986), and in areas such as teacher training the principles of CLT are largely treated as clearly understood and accepted (see, for example, Harmer 1991<sup>1</sup>).

Despite this apparent unanimity, many teachers remain somewhat confused about what exactly CLT is. At the more abstract end, there is general agreement that CLT involves an emphasis on communicating by means of the foreign language (the way in which this idea is expressed tends, as here, to be so vague as to make it difficult to disagree with); at the practical classroom end, CLT is strongly associated with a number of particular activity types, such as problem-solving and pair work. But in the middle ground, the area where theory meets practice, things become less certain. For example, what exactly does CLT set out to teach? Is there such a thing as a communicative language syllabus? If so, what does it consist of? Is it simply a notional-functional syllabus under a new name? Or does CLT only exist as a methodological approach, a way of helping learners to practise the skills needed to put their knowledge of the foreign language into use?

In working with colleagues around the world, with teachers and trainees on MA and initial TEFL courses, and with modern languages teachers in the UK, I am constantly struck by the very disparate perceptions they have of CLT. There are, I think, a number of reasons for the confusion, not least the fact that CLT has developed extremely rapidly over the past fifteen or so years and has now moved a considerable distance from its original practices (though without substantially changing its original principles).

I believe that an 'orthodox' and practical form of CLT has emerged, not only in the writings of applied linguists such as Littlewood (1992) and McDonough and Shaw (1993) but, perhaps more importantly, in mainstream language textbooks, such as the *Headway* series and the *New Cambridge English Course*, which represent good contemporary practice. However, certain misconceptions about CLT continue to survive, making it difficult for many teachers to see clearly what is happening and to identify the useful innovations that CLT has brought. A surprisingly large number of teachers that I have spoken to criticize or reject CLT for what seem to me to be the wrong reasons. In this article, I would like to set out the four misconceptions that I most frequently hear voiced, discuss why they have arisen, and explain why I think that they are misconceptions.

**Misconception 1:**  
**CLT means not**  
**teaching grammar**

This is the most persistent—and most damaging—misconception. It must be admitted, however, that there are good reasons for its existence. There have been a number of applied linguists who have argued strongly and in theoretically persuasive terms that explicit grammar teaching should be avoided. One line of argument is that grammar teaching is impossible because the knowledge that a speaker needs in order to use a language is simply too complex (Prabhu 1987). Another is that grammar teaching is unnecessary because that knowledge is of a kind which cannot be passed on in the form of statable rules, but can only be acquired unconsciously through exposure to the language (Krashen 1988).

For most teachers, the effects of these ideas have been felt through their practical application in language textbooks and syllabuses. In the early days of CLT, pioneering textbooks such as *Functions of English* included no explicit teaching of grammar (although *Functions of English* was aimed at students who had typically already been through a more conventional grammar-based course). Syllabuses were developed (and are still in force in many places) which expressed the teaching aims purely or predominantly in terms of what the learners would learn to do ('make a telephone call to book a hotel room'; 'scan a written text to extract specific information'), and which ignored or minimized the underlying knowledge of the language that they would need to actually perform those tasks.

However, the exclusion of explicit attention to grammar was never a necessary part of CLT. It is certainly understandable that there was a reaction against the heavy emphasis on structure at the expense of natural communication. It is worth looking back with hindsight at textbooks such as *New Concept English*, in its day—the late 1960s and the 1970s—enormously and deservedly popular, to see how narrow and constraining the approach was in many ways. But there have always been theorists and teachers pointing out that grammar is necessary for communication to take place efficiently, even though their voices may for a time have been drowned out in the noise of learners busily practising in pairs. This is such self-evident common sense that, from the

vantage point of the present, it seems odd that it should ever have been seriously questioned.

**Learning grammar  
through CLT: the  
retrospective  
approach**

Of course, the question of how learners are to learn the necessary grammar remains. Although, in the consensus view of CLT that I have mentioned, it is now fully accepted that an appropriate amount of class time should be devoted to grammar, this has not meant a simple return to a traditional treatment of grammar rules. The view that grammar is too complex to be taught in that over-simplifying way has had an influence, and the focus has now moved away from the teacher *covering* grammar to the learners *discovering* grammar.

Wherever possible, learners are first exposed to new language in a comprehensible context, so that they are able to understand its function and meaning. Only then is their attention turned to examining the grammatical forms that have been used to convey that meaning. The discussion of grammar is explicit, but it is the learners who are doing most of the discussing, working out—with guidance from the teacher—as much of their new knowledge of the language as can easily and usefully be expressed. Behind this strategy lies the recognition that the learners may well have ‘understood’ more about the language than they—or the teacher—can put into words. If the new language were introduced in the form of an apparently all-embracing (but actually pitifully incomplete) rule from the teacher, this would convey the unspoken message that the learners had nothing further to understand about the language point and simply needed to practise it. If, on the other hand, talking about grammar is postponed until the learners themselves can contribute by bringing to light what they already in some sense ‘know’, the unspoken message is that the process of acquiring the new knowledge is one which takes place inside them and over which they have some control. Indeed, with the recent emphasis on training learners to learn efficiently, this message is likely to be explicitly discussed.

This ‘retrospective’ approach to grammar is a natural development from the original CLT emphasis on viewing language as a system for communication; it also takes into account the fact that learning is likely to be more efficient if the learners have an opportunity to talk about what they are learning. Ellis (1992) argues that while looking explicitly at grammar may not lead immediately to learning, it will facilitate learning at a later stage when the learner is ready (in some way that is not yet understood) to internalize the new information about the language. The retrospective approach also has the advantage that, if the lesson is conducted in English, it encourages the learners to communicate fairly naturally about a subject that is important to what they are doing: the language itself.

**Misconception 2:  
CLT means  
teaching only  
speaking**

Again, there are reasons why this misconception is fairly widespread. CLT was influenced, as earlier approaches had been, by the general movement in linguistics towards giving primacy to the spoken language. In addition, a focus on encouraging learners to communicate leads

naturally towards thinking about what they will need to communicate *about*, and *why*; this is part of the wider tendency in CLT to look beyond the classroom. For many learners, the main uses that they are likely to make of the language are oral: getting around in the foreign country if they visit it, talking to visitors from that country, etc. Even if they are unlikely in reality to use the language outside the classroom, learners are often willing to suspend their disbelief and act as if they might need the language for personal contacts.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the emphasis is likely to be on speaking and listening skills.

A further reason for this misconception is that CLT stresses the need for the learners to have sufficient practice, of an appropriate kind. This is often translated, especially by teacher trainers, into the principle that TTT (teacher talking time) is to be reduced, and STT (student talking time) is to be maximized—chiefly by putting students into pairs and telling them to talk to their partners. At the same time, while the slogan ‘TTT bad, STT good’ almost certainly represents a useful (though perhaps rarely attained) goal for most teachers, it is also important to recognize that communication does not only take place through speech, and that it is not only the speaker (or writer) who is communicating. Communication through language happens in both the written and spoken medium, and involves at least two people. Learners reading a text silently to themselves are taking part in communication (assuming that the text has something of relevance to them) just as much as if they were talking to their partner.

No doubt this seems too obvious to be worth saying; and yet I have heard the complaint that CLT ignores written language surprisingly often, from experienced teachers as well as trainees. Learners are probably likely to talk more in a successful CLT class than in classes using ‘traditional’ approaches; but a glance at recent mainstream textbooks will immediately show that they are also likely to be reading and writing a more varied range of texts than those in more traditional classes. CLT involves encouraging learners to take part in—and reflect on—communication in as many different contexts as possible (and as many as necessary, not only for their future language-using needs, but also for their present language-learning needs). Perhaps, rather than student talking time, we should be thinking about the broader concept of student communicating time (or even just student time, to include necessary periods of silent reflection undistracted by talk from teacher or partner).

**Misconception 3:**  
**CLT means pair**  
**work, which**  
**means role play**

The misconception here is not so much in the emphasis on pair work itself as in the narrowness of the second assumption concerning the ways in which it is used. Role play can certainly be a useful technique—though personally my heart sinks a little when I see yet another instruction along the lines: ‘One of you is the shopkeeper/hotel manager/doctor’s receptionist; the other is the customer/guest/patient. Act out the conversation’. However, pair work (and group work) are far more flexible and useful techniques than that suggests.

One of the constant themes of CLT is that learners need to be given some degree of control over their learning (since language is a system of choices, the learners must be given the opportunity to learn how to make choices). Looking back, again with hindsight, at popular textbooks of even the fairly recent past, such as *Kernel Lessons Intermediate* from the 1970s, it is immediately noticeable that the content of what is said by the learners is controlled at every point by the book: make a question using these prompts; answer these questions about the text; read this dialogue, and so on. Even when pair work is used, the learners never choose *what* to say, they simply work out how to say what they are told to say.<sup>3</sup>

The use of pair work is a physical signal of some degree of control and choice passing to the learners; but that needs to be complemented by real choice—which role play, particularly at simpler levels, may not encourage as much as other uses of pair work. It is helpful to start from considering how learners working together can actually help each other. They can provide each other with a relatively safe opportunity to try out ideas before launching them in public: this may well lead to more developed ideas, and therefore greater confidence and more effective communication. They can also provide knowledge and skills which may complement those of their partners: this can lead to greater success in undertaking tasks.

*Alternative uses of pair work*

Instead of just seeing pair work as a useful follow-up, a way of getting everyone practising at the same time after a new language point has been introduced, we can see it as a potential preliminary stage to any contribution from the learners. They can work together to do a grammatical exercise, solve a problem, analyse the new language structures in a text, prepare a questionnaire for other members of the class, or agree on the opinion they want to present to the class. Once pair work is seen as a preparation as well as (or more than) an end-point, the range of possibilities increases dramatically. It is less a question of: 'When in my lesson do I get to the freer practice stage so that I can fit in a role play in pairs?' and more a question of 'Is there any reason why I can't use pair work as part of whatever I'm planning to do now?' (Of course, one reason for not using it may be simply variety—even the best techniques can be overused.)

**Misconception 4:**  
**CLT means**  
**expecting too**  
**much from the**  
**teacher**

It is perhaps cheating to label this a misconception, since there is a great deal of truth in the argument—voiced most persuasively by Medgyes (1986)—that CLT places greater demands on the teacher than certain other widely-used approaches. Lessons tend to be less predictable; teachers have to be ready to listen to what learners say and not just how they say it, and to interact with them in as 'natural' a way as possible; they have to use a wider range of management skills than in the traditional teacher-dominated classroom. In addition, non-native speakers of English probably need a higher level of language proficiency—or rather, a different balance of proficiency skills—to be able to communicate with ease, and to cope with discussing a broader

range of facts about language use than they are accustomed to. Perhaps most importantly, teachers may have to bring to light deeply-buried preconceptions about language teaching (mostly based on their own language learning experiences at school and university), and to compare them openly with alternative possibilities that may be less familiar but perhaps make better pedagogic sense.

In some ways, there is no answer to these points. It is certainly difficult, for example, to ignore the charge that CLT is an approach developed by and for native speaker teachers. Nevertheless, the label of misconception is perhaps valid for two reasons. Firstly, the points are presented as defects of CLT, as reasons for rejecting it, but they can equally well be presented as reasons for embracing it. Teachers have the opportunity to re-evaluate their beliefs and practices; they have an incentive to develop their skills; they are encouraged to enjoy themselves in their work, to avoid dull repetition of the same predictable set of materials, activities, and answers year in, year out. This view may appear unduly optimistic to some, but there seems no reason to assume that the majority of teachers do not welcome such opportunities—if they are recognized as such.

Secondly, the extent of the demands can easily be exaggerated—indeed, this misconception may sometimes be fostered by teachers who may have other reasons for not wishing to change their current practices. Even Medgyes (1986), in order to make his point more forcefully, ends up by describing as the CLT norm an unrealistically superhuman teacher that few CLT teachers would recognize. It can, admittedly, be difficult to use a communicative approach if you are obliged to use resolutely uncommunicative materials; but that is increasingly not the case. Many textbooks now provide very practical, straightforward CLT guidelines and activities which place few demands on the teacher beyond a willingness to try them out with enough conviction. The majority of non-native teachers of English that I have worked with have a high enough level of proficiency to cope fairly easily with the required shift towards more fluent and less pre-planned use of the language. And it seems very odd for language teachers to argue that listening responsively to what other people say is not part of their job—perhaps teachers who do argue that should be thinking of going into politics instead?

**Conclusion** Given the fairly dramatic change in attitudes not only to language but also to learners and teachers that came with the development of CLT, it is not surprising that it has taken some time to work out the implications for all aspects of the teaching/learning process. It is, however, worrying that many people's perceptions of CLT seem to have got stuck at its early stage of questioning and experimentation (admittedly sometimes over-enthusiastic), before some of the key issues were fully resolved.

CLT is by no means the final answer—no doubt the next 'revolution' in language teaching is already under way somewhere. But whatever innovations emerge, they will do so against the background of the changes brought about by CLT, and will need to accommodate or



explicitly reject those changes. Certain of them are too important to lose: the concern with the world beyond the classroom, the concern with the learner as an individual, the view of language as structured to carry out the functions we want it to perform. In order to ensure that these changes are not pushed aside in future developments, it seems essential to attempt to clear away misconceptions that might otherwise be used to damn them and CLT as a whole.

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## Notes

- 1 Interestingly, Harmer rejects the term 'communicative' for the approach outlined in his book. He prefers to call it a 'balanced activities approach', because of the inclusion of controlled, non-communicative activities as an integral part of learning. However, since the approach takes communicative activities as the point towards which the other activities are designed to lead, there seems no reason not to accept Littlewood's (1992) term 'pre-communicative' for the controlled activities, and to keep 'communicative approach' as the general term.
- 2 An alternative approach to setting up goals for language learning is to hold out as the final destination some kind of abstract mastery of the language (perhaps with a structure-oriented examination as the final validation). This runs counter to the basic principles of CLT because it treats the language merely as a classroom-bound object of study, a pedagogic dead-end. Another alternative, which does provide an outside, authentically communicative goal, is to teach the language as a means of preparing to read literature. This is still accepted as the main aim in many university courses in particular. However, it represents a demoralisingly difficult and remote goal for a great many learners. Conversation has the advantage that it is possible to take part in it reasonably successfully at many levels, including elementary.
- 3 This is essentially no different from the way in which translation is used in the grammar-translation method: the sentence or text to be translated provides the content, and learner and teacher only have to worry about how to express that content. This control of content simplifies the teacher's task, of course, in that he or she does not need to judge—or respond to—the appropriacy, interest, relevance, etc., of what the learners say, but only whether or not the responses are grammatically correct (see Misconception 4).

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