

Matching Communicative Language Teaching to a Japanese EFL Context with The Principled Communicative Approach

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Abstract

For native English speaker teachers in Japan who have the responsibility of encouraging their students to speak in English during class, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can seem like a misnomer. Japanese learners' reticence to communicate with one another within the scope of meaningful communicative classroom practice often hinders any attempts at improving their spoken English. Furthermore, the recent trend, influenced by Dogme ELT, of EFL teachers looking for options other than textbook-based lessons, has perhaps exacerbated the situation within EFL in Japan. The Principled Communicative Approach (PCA) is a focused attempt to systemize the practice of declarative L2 input designed to bring about the automatization of grammatical rules and lexis for meaningful communicative practice. In this way, the traditional context of EFL in Japan can maintain its cultural preference for a teacher-fronted pedagogy while using it to increase the efficacy of CLT's more implicit meaning-focused communicative learning strategies. Opportunities for the application of PCA with a commercially published textbook will be discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the arrival of Dogme ELT and its move away from a textbook-based pedagogy in the early 2000s, the trend of returning to a "stronger version" of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with its rejection of an explicit grammar focus at the expense of a "fluency first" stance has been in vogue in western ELT methodology. Dogme is a teaching approach which essentially rejects published textbook syllabi as over-prescriptive and instead prioritizes the real communication between learners and teacher to provide both thematic and linguistic lesson content. However, in traditional cultures such as Japan, students often resist their teacher's attempts to facilitate learners to create their own syllabi through so-called meaningful communication.

In the article "How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach?" Ellis[1] (1996) argues that if communicative language teaching is to be applied to Far East English language classrooms then it must be altered in some way in keeping with the culture in question. Many Asian learners and teachers of English have different cultural traditions as to how classroom interaction should proceed and what should be practiced and how. This is invariably a position that will be at loggerheads with the western teacher, who was most likely trained to champion a communicative approach with an idea of saving learners from their previous teacher-led English learning experience. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine the main ideas of CLT, their cultural appropriacy when viewed through the lens of the

specific English teaching context in Japan, and to consider a principled approach to CLT for the native English speaker teacher to implement in Japan, bringing about the collaboration of both explicit and implicit learning processes. A discussion on how such principles could be realized and applied to specific textbook material will also be considered.

2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

According to Richards and Rogers[2] (2001) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) came about due to a realization of the need to pay attention to communicative proficiency rather than solely knowledge of discrete linguistic structures that had gone before, with the process of communication as an important end-product. The main difference between the audio linguistic approach and CLT is the former relied on the psychological construct of behaviorism, whereas the latter only followed the premise of “learning through doing” and an emphasis placed on “situational meaning.” Lacking any single authoritative source, CLT went solely on trust that communicative language ability developed through the engagement of meaningful “communicative tasks.” In fact it was this lack of clarity surrounding situational meaning coupled with a lack of any psychological grounding in language acquisition to inform a teaching method that resulted in the various interpretations of CLT. This brought about the extremes of a no-grammar approach contrasting severely with an acknowledgement that both functional and structural components of language should be addressed.

A general set of principles of CLT learning theory includes:

- Language learnt by communicating
- Authentic and meaningful activities
- A premium on fluency
- Communication produced through integrative language skills
- Learning from trial and error through creative communicative risk-taking.

3. Ellis on the cultural appropriateness of CLT

Ellis[1] (1996) discusses the challenge of transferring teaching styles between cultures and how that can be transitioned more smoothly if an understanding of traditional “beliefs and values” is taken into account allowing new learning to frame itself in the “learner’s world view”. A failure to do so, runs the risk of learners from traditional backgrounds devaluing new, or in this case, communicative teaching processes. These cultural differences are such a major cause of misunderstandings and inaccurate perceptions of interactions, that the notion of a single Western methodological approach i.e. CLT, being applied to every teaching situation worldwide regardless of culture is something that frankly is beyond the scope of possibility.

Ellis illustrates this with the Western “teacher-as-facilitator” notion which is upheld as the model teacher-student relationship in the West. CLT places a lot of weight on process rather than content, and meaning rather than form. Ellis regards this as “unsuitable” for both learners and teachers in Asia who have predominantly engaged with a content approach, and whose collectivist cultures place importance on the learning of linguistic form.

Ellis provides two bridges to these cultural divides: an “interculture” which seeks to join mutually accessible elements from both cultures; and, the western teacher as “cultural mediator” who understands both self and learner cultural identity to uncover similarities with what look like opposing cultural norms, and empathize with the experiences of learners. Through mediating, any professional teaching skill they possess, can be implemented in the Asian classroom allowing them to transcend a purely theoretical stance with regard to communicative language teaching.

4. Communicative language teaching in the English language classroom in Japan

In Japan, except for the university entrance-examination preparation classes at high-school level, where CLT is avoided, concerns for the appropriateness of CLT to other Japanese EFL contexts might include: its efficacy; the degree to which it can be mixed with traditional approaches and needs; and the imposition of native speaker (NS) language ideology, with its culturally-affiliated definition of “communication” in commercially-produced, global textbooks. As mentioned, the cultural appropriacy of the communicative approach is something that must be considered if its influence is to find its way into non-Western pedagogical contexts. In Japan, for example, traditionally the teacher is viewed as “an expert and leader” (not a facilitator) due to a cultural expectation of teacher-centred learning, and there is also a need to qualify a definition of “communicative competence” in the Japanese EFL context ([3]Hedge, 2001). Furthermore, in agreement with Ellis, Hedge urges practitioners to be more sensitive to specific contexts, relinquish a firm reliance on CLT and shape teaching practices accordingly, achieving a balance between teacher-held belief of methodology and “contextual conditions” formulating a “situated pedagogy”, prioritizing the context rather than teacher beliefs.

It is clear then that a CLT approach which is more amenable to traditional pedagogical contexts should be sought i.e. an approach which offers plenty of explicit language input within a systematic learning framework. The Principled Communicative Approach, which tries to counterbalance a focus on form and communicative meaning may certainly provide some of the answers to a native English teacher in Japan.

5. A Principled Communicative Approach

As discussed, CLT classrooms have recently shifted towards creating a naturalistic environment in which supposedly language acquisition occurs following copious authentic input as is the case in which the mother tongue is learned. This happens well with L1 learning but is not mirrored in an untaught L2 learning environment of a school ([4]Dörnyei, 2013).

Lightbrown and Spada[5](2006:176), categorically state:

“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.”

With this in mind, the Principled Communicative Approach (PCA) highlights a need for explicit instruction to clarify form or provide controlled practice pushing learners past basic communication towards a desired target ability. This explicit learning process is not meant to replace implicit learning but rather focus on the two processes working together. This integration is realized with a focus on form and form-focused instruction, fluency and automatization, and formulaic language.

5.1 Focus on form and form-focused instruction

Learning a language can be viewed as a deliberate or incidental unconscious action known as explicit and implicit learning respectively. It is this latter view that has given rise to the belief that creating classroom environments which simulate naturalistic learning conditions must be salient because it comes near to L1 language acquisition to substantiate its validity. However, despite the powerful potential for infants acquiring an L1, it has been shown that for efficient L2 acquisition an instructional approach is far more effective than relying on meaning of “comprehensible input” ([5]Lightbown and Spada 2006). Explicit learning centering on a focus on form, not just L2 exposure, is necessary to produce communicatively effective learners moving towards target-like L2 ability. This does not mean however that with recent shifts towards the inclusion of more explicit practices that implicit learning should be replaced, but rather it is important to combine the two approaches. The focus on form within a meaning-focused CLT approach does not mean a total return to grammar though, but rather the inclusion of language issues (grammar). Ellis. R.[6] (2008:420) calls this the ‘strong interface position’, one in which ‘explicit knowledge converts to implicit knowledge through practice’ or a shift from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge, i.e. not learning through doing, but learning, then doing. This finds its roots in cognitive skill-learning theory, which highlights the importance of using declarative knowledge to encode or internalize a particular skill before actual practice takes place.

5.2 Fluency and automatization

After the initial declarative input stage with rules and examples to begin the internalization process, there follows a practice period which starts controlled with intensive repetition of meaningful language, and progresses to semi-controlled activities, ending with free practice despite the inclusion of an explicit language framework.

5.3 Formulaic language

Formulaic language chunks are consciously learned with the intention of greatly increasing automatized fluent language production. Memorized as single units, they are retrieved quickly in real-time production. Native speakers of a language have at their disposal thousands of preassembled

language chunks to use as conversational building blocks. The cognitive ease by which these chunks are accessed allow the speaker to simultaneously manage the entire act of communication by allowing more planning to be channeled into discourse. For L2 learners, however, the lack of such language chunks means sentences are mostly created from the individual word level, which requires greater cognitive capacity which in turn distances them from nativelike fluency, ([7]Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992).

5.4 The Seven Principles

Dörnyei [4] (2013) distills these ideas into seven principles to embody both explicit and implicit learning mechanisms that resonate with current research beliefs for taught second language acquisition to form a systematic psychological concept. The seven guiding principles in the Principled Communicative Approach are as follows:

1. The personal significance principle - personal meaning imbued communication. A major facet of learner-centered CLT from the outset.
2. The controlled practice principle - practice of discrete skills to strengthen the automatization of an L2, similar to a musician or athlete practicing to improve performance.
3. The declarative input principle - explicit input such as memorizing lists of vocabulary to initiate the automatization process.
4. The focus-on-form principle - analysis of the formal or structural aspect of an L2 to promote linguistic, discursive and pragmatic accuracy and appropriacy, while balancing the inclusion of meaningful-based activities.
5. The formulaic language principle - encouraging learner noticing of formulaic language and practicing them to increase automaticity.
6. The language exposure principle - encouraging extensive exposure to L2 input to activate learner implicit learning processes enhanced by pre-task activities.
7. The focused interaction principle - the provision of real L2 interaction, centered on an identifiable formal or functional purpose making use of target phrases.

Dörnyei sums this up as "a creative integration of meaningful communication with relevant declarative input and the automatization of both linguistic rules and lexical items."

In many ways, these principles are already utilized to varying degrees in most modern commercially-produced textbooks. As previously mentioned, textbooks have recently come under fire with new teaching approaches such as Dogme ELT which have sought to marginalize the efficacy of a textbook-based pedagogy by identifying itself with a strong version of CLT with its fluency-first approach and

aligning itself with task-based learning with a retrospective stance on grammar input ([8]Meddings and Thornbury, 2009). The fact that PCA aligns itself with up-to-date psycholinguistic research pertaining to skill-learning theory, should allow the textbook to once again find legitimacy among teachers, giving them confidence to use explicit input before practice takes place.

6. Applying PCA in a Japanese EFL context

The above Principles are a clear way to integrate two previously opposed pedagogies i.e. a more traditional teacher-fronted directly-taught approach common in Japan with a meaning focused CLT, and multiple activities could cover all seven of them. As mentioned above, modern commercially produced textbooks offer many opportunities to utilize PCA. To illustrate this, unit six from Cutting-edge Pre-intermediate, Third edition (Oxford University Press, 2016), a typical commercially-produced communicative textbook, will be used to examine to what extent the seven PCA Principles can be utilized, and provide several suggestions for expansion for the following aims provided by the material:

- Vocabulary - going holiday; describing holidays;
- Grammar - plans and intentions; predictions with will and won't;
- Task - Choose a holiday.
- Opportunities for intensive listening and reading.

6.1 Vocabulary

The title of Unit six is “Going Away” and starts with vocabulary input for going on holiday (*vacation* in American English). There are three exercises, with exercise 2 being an opportunity for declarative input by providing a list of items that could be packed for a holiday – Principle 3 (P3). Further practice of this input is in the workbook section at the back of the textbook. Students could learn this list either for homework or in class then use the gap-fill exercises provided to test them. This first page of vocabulary also provides opportunities for P1, 3, 5 and 7 to be utilized. This is a useful combination of principles which reoccur throughout any textbook sequence where students are required to talk about their own experiences in relation to the topic as either a warmer or as semi-controlled practice. In this particular incidence, the learners are asked to talk about the different kinds of holidays they can see in the photos provided, say which they prefer and why, then discuss questions relating to the frequency of their weekends away (if any), the location and who they go with. There is naturally plenty of scope for “personal significance” (P1). By complying with a Japanese cultural need for a teacher-led pedagogy, the teacher inputs sentence frames to help guide the students in their interactions (P3) which will tend to be formulaic (P5). These can be drilled and practiced using the teacher as model. As the exchange of information is real, this also provides focused interaction (P7).

Exercise 3, referring to the list of items in exercise 2 again, students are instructed in pairs to select five things plus two others of their own choice not on the list. Again, the teacher provides language to help what is essentially a negotiation process between the two learners: *I think it's a good idea to take ~ because ~; I want to take ~; I intend to take ~; I'd rather take ~*. This language is dealt with in the following section on grammar, and the expressions are naturally formulaic (P5).

6.2 Grammar

The grammar input (P4), also has a corresponding workbook section page at the back of the book where further attention to form can be practiced. As well as providing a focus on form, there is also an opportunity to practice discrete skills, such as listening and reading (P2). The first exercise (1a) provides statements relating to holidays which students have to mark as either true or false. This list could be dictated by the teacher to give listening practice. Exercise 1b has a short article about packing a suitcase. There is a variety of numerical data which lends itself to listening or reading practice by means of a cloze. Exercise 1c asks if students are an organized or disorganized person. This once again provides practice for P1, 3 and 5, with its need for interaction with personal significance and the teacher providing formulaic phrases and discourse markers to scaffold the interaction. P6 could also be included here with its language exposure principle. Exercise 1b introduced the theme of suitcase packing which could be expanded on with material taken from another source for example, elllo.org (English Listening Lesson Library Online). This is listening material available on the internet with its own audio-scripts and quizzes. For example, Lesson #895 "Packed" is just under two minutes long and is about someone who lives out of a suitcase. The material provides students with vocabulary such as: *prolific traveler; live out of a suitcase; days gone by; personal hygiene; and necessities*, and could serve as homework with students practicing reading aloud or shadowing, with teacher feedback in the following lesson.

Exercise 2 presents eight sentences on the theme of holiday preparations beginning with a combination of the following stems: *I'd like to~; I'd rather (not)~; I'm planning to ~; I'm (not) going to~* one such example is: *I'd rather not write a list of things I need to pack*. This activity could be done as a read aloud information gap activity with one student having the odd number sentences; the other having even numbers. This would be P2 offering controlled practice with the teacher emphasizing the high frequency of such language being formulaic (P5). This language is specifically analyzed for its meaning with the students selecting the closest in meaning of the two options to the sentence:

I'm going to take a taxi to the airport.

I want to take / I intend to take a taxi to the airport.

As is often the case with communicative textbooks, the method by which attention is given to form is indirect instruction (the textbook supplies language examples to illustrate the target structure for learners to 'discover' the rule for themselves, inductively. In this case, the students have to notice the following verb form after the stem, i.e. infinitive with or without "to". To practice this (P4), the textbook

offers a specific Practice section in which students should make a six-item questionnaire about going away, from prompts such as:

(plan/have) any days or weekends away in the near future? Who (plan/go) with?

Students ask each other the six questions and provide real information when answering (P7).

Depending on their ability the teacher could provide formulaic answer stems such as: *Nothing definite, but I'll probably end up ~ing ~ with ~.*(P5)

If students require further controlled practice before making the questionnaire, there are two exercises included in the workbook section at the back of the textbook to further consolidate the form.

Alternatively, these could be used as a review by completing them as is, and then again as a later review as dictation. This follows P2 by giving sufficient controlled practice to move learners towards their automatization of the language.

6.3 Task

The task is to choose a holiday from five location options. As a warmer exercise, students are told that they are planning a long weekend with friends, and asked to think of places they could go to and the different activities they could do there. This is an opportunity for P1,3 and 5 to be utilized. This necessitates language for *suggesting, stating and asking preferences, and agreeing and disagreeing*, and will be needed in the main task. Most of the required language is provided on the opposite page under the heading *Useful Language* except for *suggesting* which is easily supplemented with stems such as, *Why don't we~; We could ~; How about ~ing~?*

Without drawing attention to the Useful Language the teacher can input some phrases from there to help complete the warmer activity (P3). These will be used again for the main task, so initial exposure at this stage is important to help begin the shift from declarative to procedural knowledge.

Students read information about the competition rules and holiday locations and answer six comprehension questions. Proceeding this, students listen to two friends choosing a location and answer two comprehension questions. The teacher could allow students to listen numerous times and provide a listening cloze specifically targeting the language from the Useful Language. Students then move on to actually carrying out the task of choosing a location for a holiday in groups (P2). The groups are split up and reformed into new groups with students sharing which location their first group chose and why (P2). Students could then individually video themselves explaining their choices with a homework assignment of transcribing the text and analyzing it for grammatical accuracy and a general focus on form (P4).

7. Conclusion

PCA offers a situated pedagogy for the Japanese EFL context allowing the balance between form and content, and process and meaning to be readdressed thus creating a culturally appropriate form of CLT.

The most important thing about PCA is to utilize practice opportunities to allow a shift in focus from explicit form-focused activities to communicative exercises. Where explicit attention to L2 form is required it should be practiced intensively and sufficiently to maximize the successful outcomes of communicative meaningful utterances within a specific target language framework which allow the learner to gradually move toward a target-like second language ability.

8. References

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