THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ENGLISH CLASSES

X.F.Islomova
associate professor of the institute
of retraining and professional development of
specialists in physical culture and sports

Abstract

The article argues that CLT fundamentally redefines the goal of language instruction: moving from the acquisition of grammatical knowledge to the development of communicative competence—the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real-world contexts. Through an analysis of key principles—meaningful communication, task-based learning, learner-centeredness, and authentic materials—this article demonstrates how CLT transforms English classes from teacher-dominated grammar instruction into dynamic environments where learners actively construct meaning.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, communicative competence, English language teaching, task-based learning, learner-centered instruction, classroom practice

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, English language teaching was dominated by methods that treated language as a system of grammatical rules to be memorized and applied. The Grammar-Translation Method focused on analyzing texts and translating sentences. The Audiolingual Method emphasized repetitive drills and pattern practice. In both approaches, the goal was accuracy—producing grammatically correct sentences—rather than the ability to communicate effectively in real situations.

Today, CLT stands as the most widely adopted approach to English language teaching globally. Its influence is evident in international curricula, textbook series, and assessment frameworks. Yet, despite its dominance, CLT remains frequently misunderstood and inconsistently implemented. This article examines the role of CLT in English classes, clarifying its theoretical foundations, articulating its core principles, and exploring how it transforms classroom practice.

Discussion

The theoretical foundation of CLT lies in the reconceptualization of what it means to “know” a language. Noam Chomsky's (1965) concept of **linguistic competence**—the abstract, unconscious knowledge of grammatical rules—dominated linguistic theory for decades. However, Chomsky's framework did not account for how language is actually used in social interaction.

Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of **communicative competence** as a corrective. He argued that knowing a language involves more than grammatical knowledge; it requires knowing:

- **Whether** something is formally possible (grammaticality)
- **Whether** something is feasible (processing constraints)
- **Whether** something is appropriate (sociocultural norms)
- **Whether** something is done (actual occurrence)

This expanded view recognized that language learners need to develop not only grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic appropriateness, strategic competence for overcoming communication breakdowns, and discourse competence for creating coherent texts.

Models of Communicative Competence

Canale and Swain (1980) and later Canale (1983) proposed a framework that remains influential in CLT pedagogy:

Component	Description	Classroom Implications
Grammatical Competence	Knowledge of vocabulary, word formation, sentence structure, pronunciation	Explicit instruction in language forms; accuracy-focused activities
Sociolinguistic Competence	Understanding of social rules of language use; appropriateness in context	Exposure to authentic language; role-plays; cultural awareness
Discourse Competence	Ability to connect sentences into coherent spoken or written texts	Teaching cohesion devices; organizing paragraphs; conversation management
Strategic Competence	Ability to use communication strategies to compensate for gaps	Teaching paraphrasing, clarification requests, circumlocution

This framework fundamentally expanded the goals of English instruction. A CLT classroom does not merely teach grammar and vocabulary; it develops learners' ability to navigate social interactions, produce coherent texts, and manage communication challenges.

The Role of Meaning and Use

A second theoretical foundation is the principle that **language is learned through use**. Drawing on theories of second language acquisition, researchers such as Krashen (1985) and Long (1983) argued that language acquisition occurs not through explicit instruction in rules but through exposure to comprehensible input and opportunities for meaningful interaction.

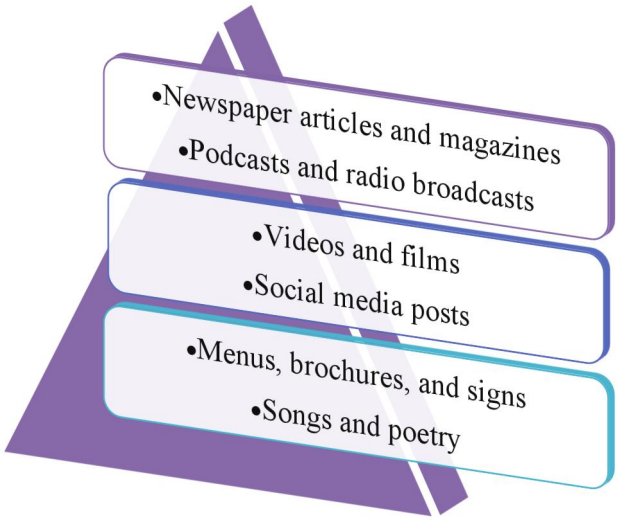
This perspective shifted the focus of instruction from **learning about language** (grammar explanation, rule memorization) to **using language for communication** (interaction, problem-solving, meaning-making). In CLT, learners are not passive recipients of grammatical knowledge but active participants in communicative events.

The primary goal of CLT is to develop learners’ communicative competence—their ability to use English effectively for real purposes. This means that activities in a CLT classroom are designed not merely to practice language forms but to engage learners in authentic communication.

Traditional Focus	CLT Focus
Grammatical accuracy	Communicative effectiveness
Isolated sentences	Extended discourse
Teacher-controlled practice	Learner-generated communication
Language as object	Language as tool

In a CLT classroom, learners engage in activities where they exchange information, express opinions, solve problems, and accomplish tasks using English as the medium of communication.

CLT emphasizes the use of **authentic materials**—texts and resources created for real-world communication rather than for language teaching. Authentic materials include:



Authentic materials expose learners to language as it is actually used, preparing them for real-world communication and motivating them through connection to genuine content.

The Role of CLT in English Classes: Transforming Practice

When implemented effectively, CLT transforms English classes in fundamental ways. This section examines the role CLT plays across different dimensions of classroom practice.

4.1 Redefining the Teacher's Role

In traditional English classes, the teacher functions as:

- **Controller** : Directing all activities, initiating all communication
- **Knowledge source** : The sole authority on language
- **Evaluator** : Constantly correcting and assessing

In a CLT classroom, the teacher assumes additional roles:

Role	Description
Facilitator	Creating conditions for communication; supporting learners as they interact
Organizer	Structuring activities, grouping students, managing time
Resource	Providing language input, answering questions, offering guidance
Co-learner	Participating in activities, learning from and with students
Monitor	Observing communication, noting areas for future instruction

This shift can be challenging for teachers trained in traditional approaches, but it is essential for creating communicative classrooms.

Despite its theoretical appeal and widespread adoption, CLT implementation faces persistent challenges. Understanding these challenges is essential for effective practice.CLT is often criticized for embodying Western cultural assumptions about education, including:

- Emphasis on learner autonomy over teacher authority
- Value placed on student talk and questioning
- Expectation of horizontal teacher-student relationships

In educational contexts where traditional values emphasize teacher authority, respect for hierarchy, and silent attentiveness, CLT approaches may encounter resistance from both teachers and learners.

Effective CLT implementation requires cultural adaptation. Teachers can maintain their authority while creating communicative opportunities. Structured group work, guided discovery, and culturally relevant tasks can align CLT principles with local values.

A typical CLT lesson follows a flow that balances fluency and accuracy:

Phase	Purpose	Activities
Warm-up	Engage learners; activate prior knowledge	Quick questions; brainstorming; short discussion
Pre-task	Prepare for main activity; introduce needed language	Vocabulary preview; model task; clarify instructions
Main task	Core communicative activity	Task completion in pairs or groups; teacher monitors
Planning/Report	Prepare to share outcomes	Groups prepare to present; practice language
Report/Presentation	Share results with class	Groups present; whole class discussion
Language focus	Address language issues	Feedback on language; focus on relevant forms
Practice	Consolidate learning	Additional practice; follow-up tasks

Conclusion

Communicative Language Teaching fundamentally redefines the role of English classes. Rather than spaces where learners study language as an object to be analyzed, CLT transforms classrooms into communities where learners use language as a tool for communication, connection, and meaning-making. The principles of CLT—meaningful communication, task-based learning, learner-centeredness, authentic materials, integrated skills, and balanced attention to fluency and accuracy—are not merely methodological preferences. They reflect a deeper understanding of how language is learned and used. Language acquisition occurs not through the memorization of rules but through engagement in communication. Learners develop competence not by studying about language but by using language for real purposes. The role of CLT in English classes is therefore central. It ensures that instruction prepares learners for the actual demands of using English in academic, professional, and social contexts. It positions learners as active participants in their own learning. It values communication over mere correctness, meaning over form, and use over knowledge.

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