

# **Developing a Context-Sensitive Pedagogy for Communication-Oriented Language Teaching**

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When communicative language teaching (CLT) was first developed in the 1970s, it was widely seen as the definitive response to the shortcomings of previous approaches and the communication needs of a globalized world. As such, it was exported enthusiastically over the world as a ready-to-use package of ideas and techniques. From the outset, however, there was no clear consensus about its nature and teachers experienced difficulty in defining and implementing it. There is now a widespread view that teachers need to adapt CLT to suit specific contexts. CLT cannot now be defined in terms of precise characteristics but serves rather as an umbrella term for approaches that aim to develop communicative competence through personally meaningful learning experiences. In this spirit we should aim to develop principles which help each teacher to develop a form of communication-oriented language teaching (COLT) suited to his or her own specific context.

## **I. INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF CLT**

For some 40 years now, discussions of foreign language teaching have been dominated by the concept of ‘communication’ and its various derivatives such as ‘communicative language teaching’ (CLT) and ‘communicative competence’. Hunter and Smith (2012) analyzed the keywords in articles published in one leading UK-based journal (*ELT Journal*) and showed how communicative ideas and terminology gradually climbed to a dominant status in ELT professional discourse in the years up to 1986. Since 1986 this trend has continued. Even if much discussion now refers to ‘task-based language teaching’ (TBLT) rather than CLT, this is not so much a shift of direction as a continuation within the *same* direction. As many writers have noted (e.g. Nunan, 2004, p. 10; Richards, 2005, p. 29), TBLT is best understood not as a new departure but as a development *within* CLT, in which communicative tasks ‘serve not only as major components of the methodology but also as units around which a course may be organized (Littlewood, 2004, p. 324).

National language education policies have shown a strong tendency to follow this trend. This is not surprising, since almost every nation has faced an increasing need for people who

can communicate with speakers of other languages, particularly through ‘English as a lingua franca’ (see e.g. Sewell, 2013). This trend to advocate CLT and TBLT is documented in international surveys such as those of Butler (2011), Ho and Wong (2004) and Nunan (2003). It is also confirmed by an abundance of reports from individual countries, e.g. China (Wang, 2007; Wang & Lam, 2009), Japan (Butler & Iino, 2005; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008), Korea (Jeon, 2009; Shin, 2007), Libya (Orafi & Borg, 2009), Thailand (Prapaijit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009), Uzbekistan (Hasanova & Shadieva, 2008) and Vietnam (Hiep, 2007).

## II. THE INDEFINABILITY OF CLT

Whilst Hunter and Smith’s (2012) analysis shows the rising prominence of communicative ideas, it also contradicts any claim that there was a general consensus in the 1980s concerning the actual *nature* of a communicative approach or that there was ever an agreed conception of what CLT really meant. This lack of consensus has been confirmed in the years since then. For example, in response to Bax’s (2003) prediction of ‘the end of CLT’, Harmer (2003, p. 289) suggests that ‘the problem with communicative language teaching (CLT) is that the term has always meant a multitude of different things to different people’. Spada (2007, p. 272) expresses a similar view in her review of CLT: ‘What is communicative language teaching? The answer to this question seems to depend on whom you ask.’ Hall (2011, p. 93) agrees and goes on to note that ‘everyday classroom practices can appear to be quite different when CLT principles are applied in differing social and educational contexts’

Not surprisingly, this lack of certainty has also been found also in practising teachers’ conceptions of CLT. In Korea, for example, Li (1998) reported that teachers had unclear conceptions of the nature of communicative approaches. In Hong Kong, Clark et al. (1999, cited in Carless, 2003) found similar evidence with respect to teachers’ ideas about task-based learning and teaching. The ten teachers of Japanese in Australia who were observed and interviewed by Sato and Kleinsasser (1999, p. 501) saw themselves as adopting a communicative approach but ‘held varying, even fragmented, views’ about what that meant. Most of them believed that it meant learning to communicate in the L2, focusing mainly on speaking and listening, teaching very little grammar and spending a lot of time preparing activities. In their actual practice, however, they were rarely guided by these beliefs and adopted mainly a teacher-fronted approach with little interaction amongst students. Thompson (1996) surveyed teachers from a range of countries and found conceptions similar to those of the teachers in Australia: that it means using pair or group work, teaching only speaking, not teaching grammar, and a lot of hard work for the teacher. According to Ho & Wong’s (2004, p. xxxiv) summary of fifteen national surveys in East Asia, CLT has been implemented in various ways ‘with the term almost meaning different things to different English teachers’. According to Ho (2004, p. 26), the most common understanding of the communicative

approach in East Asia is that it means ‘providing the teachers with communicative activities in their repertoire of teaching skills and giving learners the opportunity in class to practise the language skills taught’.

In view of this lack of certainty, it is not surprising that (a) different people focus on different features in characterizing CLT but also that (b) these same elements are found in other approaches which are *not* explicitly described as CLT. For example, Byrne (1986) does not use the label ‘communicative’ to describe his approach (in his Preface, his aim is ‘successful language teaching’), but a large proportion of the activities he describes (such as information-gap activities, role plays, problem-solving, using visual stimuli and authentic materials) form part of the basic repertoire of teachers who *would* hope to be identified as ‘communicative’. This indefinable nature of CLT is highlighted by Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 173), who say that many of the characteristics cited for CLT ‘address very general aspects of language learning and teaching that are now largely accepted as self-evident and axiomatic throughout the profession’. In Harmer’s view (2007, p. 70), too, CLT is not a definable concept but simply ‘a generalized “umbrella” term to describe learning sequences which aim to improve the students’ ability to communicate’ in contrast to ‘teaching which is aimed more at learning bits of language just because they exist – without focusing on their use in communication’.

### III. THE TWO VERSIONS OF CLT

One important source of uncertainty about the meaning of CLT is that from the outset, it has existed in two different versions which correspond roughly to the two main sources of CLT: a communicative perspective on *language* and a communicative perspective on *learning*.

- The communicative perspective on language is primarily about *what* we learn. It proposes that when we learn a language we are primarily learning not language structures but language ‘functions’ (how to ‘do things with words’). These communicative functions came to play a central role in syllabus design and methodology. The ELT world (especially the part influenced by the UK) came to be dominated by so-called ‘functional’ or ‘communicative’ courses, in which students would practise expressing functions (such as ‘making suggestions’) and then use them in ‘communicative activities’ (such as pair work, role-play, discussion and the use of authentic materials; see e.g. the activities discussed in Johnson & Morrow, 1981).
- The communicative perspective on learning focuses attention on *how* we learn,

especially on our natural capacities to ‘acquire’ language simply through communication without explicit instruction. These ideas were embodied in proposals such as Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) ‘natural approach’, which was based on the belief that only natural acquisition processes can lead to effective language learning; Prabhu’s (1987) ‘communicational language teaching’, which insisted that conscious learning and error correction have no place in the language classroom; and ‘humanistic’ approaches (e.g. Moskowitz, 1978), which emphasized the importance of engaging learners in communication in which their whole personality is invested.

In classroom practice, both perspectives lead to an emphasis on ‘communication in the classroom’ (Johnson & Morrow, 1981). But if we focus only on the communicative perspective on learning, we may draw the conclusion (as many have done) that involvement in communication is sufficient in itself for learning and that we should not make any use at all of ‘traditional’ techniques such as explanations, drills and question-and-answer practice. This has often been called (after Howatt, 1984, p. 287) the ‘strong’ version of CLT’. The communicative perspective on *language*, on the other hand, still leaves open the possibility that teachers might present and practise individual items (in a communicative context) before or after students use them for communication. This has often been called (again, after Howatt, 1984, p. 287) the ‘weak’ version of CLT.

The two versions of CLT have different implications for how language is best learnt in the classroom and for the role of the teacher. Both versions require the teacher to be a creator and organizer of communicative activities, which presents challenging roles for teachers and learners, but the weak version adopts a more familiar overall framework through its recognition of controlled and analytic learning. Allwright & Hanks (2009 pp. 47-49) argue that the ‘much less challenging ideas’ of this weak version (which they see embodied in Littlewood, 1981) ‘solved the commodity problem’ of CLT (because it could form the basis of published course books) but hindered the ‘radical rethink about learners’ that the strong version might have stimulated, if it had been commercially viable.

#### **IV. THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING CLT**

Chow & Mok-Cheung (2004, p. 158) refer to the shift from a teacher-centred pedagogy to a student-centred CLT pedagogy as a ‘quantum leap’ in the transmission-oriented context of Hong Kong schools. Wang (2007, p. 10) summarizes some of the practical challenges faced by teachers in China when they are asked to make this ‘leap’ from a traditional approach to a communication-oriented approach: they are expected to develop new practical skills for classroom teaching; change how they evaluate students; develop the ability to adapt textbooks; use modern technology; improve their own language proficiency; change their

conception of their own role from being a transmitter of knowledge to being a multi-role educator; and change their conception of language learning from one based on knowledge-acquisition to one based on the holistic development of competence. Jeon (2009, p. 126) describes a similar situation in Korea, where ‘emphasizing the communicative language approach was a drastic change compared to the previous, traditional approach to language instruction in Korea.’ The factors in this ‘drastic change’ which Jeon highlights include setting the unit of analysis at the discourse level rather than the sentence level; emphasizing communicative competence rather than only linguistic competence; moving from teacher-fronted to learner-centred classes; changing the teacher’s role from lecturer to facilitator; and working with textbooks which focus on communicative situations rather than language based on sentence examples.

Practical challenges are reported from numerous countries when teachers have been asked to implement CLT in primary and secondary schools, where classes are often large and resources are limited (e.g. Carless, 2004 in Hong Kong; Hiep, 2007 in Vietnam; Hu, 2005 in China; Jeon, 2009 and Li, 1998 in Korea; Orafi & Borg, 2009 in Libya; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008 in Japan; see also surveys of a range of East Asian countries in Butler 2011; Ho & Wong, 2004; Littlewood, 2007). These challenges include:

- Difficulties with classroom management, especially with large classes, and teachers’ resulting fear that they may lose control;
- New organizational skills required by some activities such as pair or group work;
- Students’ inadequate language proficiency, which may lead them to use the mother tongue (or only minimal English) rather than trying to ‘stretch’ their English competence;
- Excessive demands on teachers’ own language skills, if they themselves have had limited experience of communicating in English;
- Common conceptions that formal learning must involve item-by-item progression through a syllabus rather than the less observable holistic learning that occurs in communication;
- Common conceptions that the teacher’s role is to transmit knowledge rather than act as a facilitator of learning and supporter of autonomy;
- The negative ‘washback’ effect of public examinations based on pencil-and-paper tests which focus on discrete items and do not prioritize communication;
- Resistance from students and parents, who fear that important examination results may suffer as a result of the new approach.

Following her survey of teachers in the Asia-Pacific region, Butler (2011, p. 36) classifies the challenges as involving ‘(a) conceptual constraints (e.g., conflicts with local

values and misconceptions regarding CLT/TBLT); (b) classroom-level constraints (e.g., various student and teacher-related factors, classroom management practices, and resource availability); and (c) societal-institutional level constraints (e.g., curricula and examination systems)'. With specific reference to the Korean experience with CLT, Li (1998) groups teachers' difficulties with CLT under four factors similar to those of Butler (2011): the teacher factor, the student factor, the education system factor, and the method factor. The factors which emerge from Kim's (2008) analysis of one teacher's behaviour could be grouped under similar categories: the teacher's own experience as an English learner, students' low proficiency level in English, the effectiveness of traditional methods of instruction for preparing students for high-stake school exams, top-down teacher training, class size, teachers' and students' socialization in the educational context, and teachers' and students' beliefs about language teaching and learning. After a survey of 305 teachers in Korea, Jeon (2009) notes that 'while it can be seen that many EFL teachers support the introduction of the communicative approach in Korea, it is also evident that too many discouraging factors will inhibit their enthusiasm for actually implementing the communicative approach in reality' (p. 146).

## **V. ADAPTING CLT TO LOCAL SITUATIONS**

In its early days CLT was perceived by many as a new and unquestionable orthodoxy. As Morrow & Johnson (1983, p. 4) put it with reference to a seminal conference that they organized in 1978, in those days 'functional syllabuses [on which early CLT courses were based] seemed to offer an automatic solution to all the problems of language teaching'. As a package of ideas and techniques, CLT was exported around the world with the support of the full paraphernalia of the ELT industry (textbooks, advisors, training courses, native-speaker teachers, and so on). Bax (2003, p. 280) writes of what he sees as the 'CLT attitude' that accompanied this endeavour: 'assume and insist that CLT is the whole and complete solution to language learning; assume that no other method could be any good; ignore people's own views of who they are and what they want; neglect and ignore all aspects of the local context as being irrelevant'.

After experiences such as those described in the previous section, in the words of Ho & Wong (2004, p. xxxiv), 'there has been much criticism of an unquestioning acceptance of CLT techniques in ELT in this [East Asian] region and of the varying practices of CLT'. Hiep (2007, p. 196) too states, from the perspective of Vietnam, that 'teachers in many parts of the world may reject the CLT techniques transferred from the West'. However he goes on to say that 'it is doubtful that they reject the spirit of CLT'. In his words, this spirit is that 'learning is likely to happen when classroom practices are made real and meaningful to learners' and that the goal is to teach learners 'to be able to use the language effectively for their communicative

needs' (p. 196). If this is so, CLT may continue to provide a conceptual framework centred on the need (a) to orient our teaching towards learners' communicative goals and (b) to design meaningful experiences which lead towards these goals. It is in this spirit that many teachers and teacher-educators now put the emphasis not on adopting CLT but on *adapting* it to suit the context where English is taught.

The need for adaptation (in this case of TBLT, seen as an 'offshoot' of CLT) is the 'overarching conclusion' which Carless (2007) reaches after extensive interviews with 11 secondary school teachers and 10 teacher educators in Hong Kong. Carless (2007, p. 605) argues that we need 'context-sensitive teaching methods' or what he describes as 'situated task-based approaches, in which culture, setting and teachers' existing beliefs, values and practices interact with the principles of task-based teaching'. Specifically, he argues that for the Hong Kong context we need to (a) explore more fully the options for teaching grammar, (b) integrate task-based teaching better with the requirements of examinations and (c) find an appropriate balance between oral tasks and other modes such as narrative writing and extensive reading. Carless concludes his survey with the statement that 'there is clearly more conceptual and empirical work required in the development of versions of task-based approaches suitable for schooling' (p. 605).

In a similar vein, Jeon (2009, p. 147) concludes her survey of 305 teachers with the words that 'different contexts require different methods. It is time for Korean policy makers and practitioners to seek a Korean way to develop communicative competence in English'. Jeon and Paek (2009) point out that this involves not only practising a contextualized CLT that suits the Korean context but also formulating appropriate policies to overcome specific obstacles to achieving the desired goals, such as the few opportunities for learners to use English outside the classroom; insufficient class hours; lack of practice even in English classes; disconnection among the curriculum, classroom practice, and assessment; and teachers' inadequate English proficiency and training.

Several reports tell how teachers in different situations have carried out this process of 'adaptation' or 'contextualization' in their practice. For example, Carless (2004) observed that many Hong Kong teachers reinterpret the use of communicative tasks as 'contextualised practice' rather than activities in which learners negotiate meaning independently of the teacher. Mitchell & Lee (2003) found that a Korean teacher of English (as well as a British teacher of French) re-interpreted CLT in a similar way: 'Teacher-led interaction, and the mastery of correct language models, took priority over the creative language use and student centring which have been associated with more fluency-oriented or "progressivist" interpretations of the communicative approach' (p. 56). Zheng & Adamson (2003) analyze how a secondary school teacher of English 'reconciles his pedagogy with the innovative methodology in a context constrained by examination requirements and the pressure of time' (p. 323) by 'expanding his repertoire rather than rejecting previous approaches' (p. 335). He

maintains many traditional elements, such as his own role as a knowledge transmitter, the provision of grammatical explanations, and the use of memorization techniques and pattern drills. However, he integrates new ideas into his pedagogy by including more interaction and more creative responses from the students in his classes, ‘usually in the context provided by the textbook, but sometimes in contexts derived from the students’ personal experience’ (p. 331).

The discussion so far has been framed around the notion that the core notions of a ‘traditional approach’ and a ‘CLT approach’ are valid reflections of reality. However this is not a necessary assumption. Teachers may break free altogether from concepts such as ‘traditional’ and ‘CLT’. They may simply choose ideas and techniques from the universal, transnational pool that has been built up over the years and evaluate them according to how well, in their own specific context, they contribute to creating meaningful experiences which lead towards communicative competence. From this perspective, the notion that CLT is a distinct methodology disappears. Ideas and techniques from whatever source – so-called traditional, so-called CLT, or indeed any other source – constitute a common pool on which teachers can draw in order to design classroom practices which are real and meaningful to their learners and help learners towards fulfilling their communicative needs. This aligns with the suggestion of Beaumont and Chang (2011, p. 291) that the CLT / traditional dichotomy may ‘inhibit methodological development’ and it is better to define learning activities in terms of their learning outcomes and their ‘potential to make a contribution to the general goal of learning a language, i.e. successful communication’ (p. 298). It is also consistent with the views reported above that CLT now functions mainly as an ‘umbrella term’ for learning sequences that lead towards communication (Harmer, 2007, p. 70) and that what is now essential is not any specific set of ideas and techniques but ‘the spirit of CLT’ (Hiep, 2007, p. 196).

As we have seen, the term ‘CLT’ is not only ambiguous but also often carries the misleading message that there is some real and proven version of CLT to which a teacher should try to conform, even if his or her intuitions say otherwise. In an earlier paper (Littlewood, 2004, p. 325), I proposed ‘communication-oriented language teaching’ (COLT) as an alternative term which is uncontroversial about the goals of teaching (successful communication) but implies more flexibility regarding the means (which will vary with context). That is the term that I will use in the remaining part of this paper.

## **VI. APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING A CONTEXT-SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY**

The many decades of exploration in the field of language teaching methodology (surveyed for example in Littlewood, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) have left teachers



with an immense range of learning activities to choose from. Identifiable ‘methods’ such as the audio-lingual approach and situational language teaching offer teachers principles for selecting from this range and sequencing activities. But few people now believe that there is a single ‘best method’, because every teacher, teaching context and group of learners is different. We have entered what some writers call a ‘postmethod’ era (e.g. Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006 and elsewhere; Littlewood, 2011) in which the aim is not to find a single best way of teaching but to clarify principles by which each teacher can develop an approach which is sensitive to his or her own specific context. There have been several ways of approaching this search.

### 1. Principles of instructed language learning and teaching

One approach is to start from principles of second language learning and use these as a basis for proposing optimal ways of facilitating this learning. Ellis (2005a, 2005b) and Erlam (2008) worked in this way. Based on research into second language acquisition, they propose 10 “principles of effective instructed language learning”:

- Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence
- Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning
- Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form
- Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge
- Instruction needs to take into account the learner’s “built-in syllabus”
- Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input
- Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output
- The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency
- Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners
- In assessing learners’ L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 128-130) adopt a similar approach in formulating methodological principles. They propose eight ‘basic principles of language learning’:

- Language learning is a developmental process
- It is an active process
- It is a decision-making process
- It is not just a matter of linguistic knowledge

- It is not the learners' first experience with language
- It is an emotional experience
- It is to a large extent incidental
- It is not systematic

In a similar spirit Kumaradivelu (1994, 2003) suggests 10 “macro-strategies” which can form a basis for teachers to develop their pedagogy (here paraphrased):

- Provide the maximum possible number of learning opportunities
- Facilitate classroom interaction with a communicative purpose
- Minimize perceptual misunderstandings
- Activate students' intuitive capacity for independent discovery
- Foster conscious awareness of aspects of language
- Contextualize the linguistic input
- Integrate the language skills
- Promote learner autonomy
- Raise students' cultural consciousness
- Ensure social relevance

These lists are of course only proposals and other teachers will perceive different priorities. For example, the lists do not give much emphasis to the importance of motivation, learning strategies and ways of facilitating memorization.

## 2. Teachers' 'sense of plausibility'

Another way of addressing the question is to start from the “sense of plausibility” (Prabhu, 1990) of experienced teachers and develop a “teacher-generated theory of classroom practice” (Senior 2006, p. 270). Breen, Hird, Hilton, Oliver & Thwaite (2001) followed this approach when they worked from 18 teachers' accounts of their own practices and their reasons for adopting them. They found reasonable consensus on about a dozen principles, such as taking account of individual differences and making it easier for students to remember what is taught.

This approach can be extended to include experienced learners as well as teachers, since learners too have intensive first-hand experience of the learning-and-teaching process. Thus the present author presented a postgraduate class of 39 Chinese learners and teachers of English with (a) an overview of the options made available by the different ‘set methods’ of the past (as surveyed e.g. in Littlewood, 2008; Richards and Rodgers, 2001) and (b) the proposals of Ellis (2005) and Kumaradivelu (1994, 2003), as listed above. Starting from this

foundation, groups of five or six participants were asked each to discuss and propose its own list of up to 10 basic language teaching principles. The resulting list of 67 principles was then classified into seven ‘macro-principles’ as follows (other classifications would have been possible; interested readers may request the full list by email):

- Create a suitable learning environment
- Cater for learners’ needs
- Pay attention to learners’ interests and motivation
- Orient learning towards active use of language
- Adopt a variety of learning activities
- Give appropriate feedback and assessment
- Pay attention to the cultural dimension of language learning

Principles such as these may then be implemented by teachers through classroom strategies and techniques which are ‘context-sensitive’ in their own teaching situation.

### 3. Accumulated professional experience illuminated by language teaching theory

A third approach is that taken by Littlewood (2004, 2011). This approach aims to build on accumulated classroom experience as well as current language teaching theory. More specifically, it attempts to combine the broader view of communicative competence that formed a major impetus to the development of CLT with the continuum from ‘analytic learning’ (where the focus is mainly on separate aspects of language use) to ‘experiential learning’ (where the focus is mainly on the holistic use of language for communication) (see for example Stern, 1992, for a detailed analysis and Kumaradivelu, 2006, for a briefer introduction). The resulting ‘communicative continuum’ (see Figure 1) consists of five categories which locate activities in relation to each other and the goal of communicative competence:

**Figure 1**  
**The ‘Communicative Continuum’ as a Basis for COLT**

Analytic Strategies		← →		Experiential Strategies	
Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative language practice	Communicative language practice	Structured communication	Authentic communication	
Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean, e.g. substitution exercises, inductive ‘discovery’ and awareness-raising activities	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others, e.g. describing visuals or situational language practice (‘questions and answers’)	Practising pre-taught language but in a context where it communicates new information, e.g. information gap activities or ‘personalised’ questions	Using language to communicate in situations which elicit pre-learnt language but with some degree of unpredictability, e.g. structured role-play and simple problem-solving	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable, e.g. creative role-play, more complex problem-solving and discussion	
<b>Focus on forms and meanings</b>		← →		<b>Focus on meanings and messages</b>	

Brandl (2008), Littlewood (2000) and Ma (2008) give examples of activities from different parts of the continuum, which has proved an accessible basis for teacher education as well as for analyzing the classroom practice of teachers seeking to establish a more communicative classroom (e.g. Deng & Carless, 2009). For teachers accustomed to a tradition dominated by controlled, form-oriented activities, the framework provides dimensions for innovation and expansion. They can maintain their base in activities represented in the first and second categories, but gradually expand their repertoire into the other three. In this way they can grow but retain a sense of security and value in what they have done before, two important conditions for the postmethod pedagogy which COLT has now become.

A second dimension in this framework is the learners' motivation and personal involvement with the learning task, whatever its precise nature may be. It is a basic condition for all learning that learners should be involved in it (how else can they learn?) and this dimension is not specific to language learning. Accordingly, we can draw on a large body of general educational and psychological wisdom as well as specific studies of language learning motivation in seeking ways to stimulate it in the classroom context.

In principle the two dimensions are independent. For example, learners may feel a high degree of involvement in a form-focused language exercise but feel only minimal involvement in an uninteresting discussion or role-play, or vice versa. In general, however, increased attention to meaning is believed to lead to increased involvement.

## VII. THE FUTURE OF COLT

This section will outline five areas that need special attention as we move into the future with communication-oriented language teaching.

### 1. Establishing closer links between practice, theory and research

It is clear from the previous section that top-down approaches, in which policy-makers and other ‘experts’ legislate on how language is best taught, have lost their validity. Every teacher is the best expert in his or her own situation but can draw insights from other people (theorists as well as teachers) and test them in this situation. This means that in the search for sound principles on which to base a pedagogy, it is important that theory, research and practice work together on a basis of equality.

Akbari (2008) emphasizes the importance of bridging the gap between the ‘community of practice’ of language teachers and the ‘academic discourse community’ of theorists and researchers. A major aim of Erlam’s (2008) project, mentioned above, was to make the research relevant and accessible, as the resulting material was used for input and discussion in seminars around the country. In this way both researchers and teachers could engage with it, benefit from each other’s expertise, and develop a shared discourse.

The final determinant of successful language teaching is of course not the conceptual frameworks with which theorists and researchers work but the frameworks of theories, beliefs and assumptions with which teachers work in their specific classrooms. An important means for renewal in a postmethod pedagogy is therefore collaborative research in which teachers and theorists / researchers work together from the outset (e.g. through procedures such as those described in Burns, 2010) to identify and explore issues and problems that require attention.

With or without the collaboration of research specialists, teaching is itself a process of exploration: for each class, a teacher predicts the outcomes of his or her interventions and observes the results. What we typically call ‘research’ means simply that a person explains and justifies the predictions more explicitly, describes the interventions more systematically, and measures the results more precisely. Every teacher is in a position to take these steps and engage in ‘exploratory practice’ (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Hayes and Chang (2012) survey various other forms of continuous professional development (CPD) in which teachers can participate with the aim of matching their activity with the unique context of their own school.

### 2. Exploring optimal combinations of analytic and experiential strategies.

Some of the most significant strategic decisions that classroom teachers have to make

concern the complementary functions of analytic and experiential strategies. This issue is at the heart of the distinction between the ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ versions of CLT discussed above (the latter affirming that analytic learning is not necessary) and is also central to considering the respective roles of accuracy-based and fluency-based activities (Brumfit, 1984). More recently, much research has addressed the role that form-focused instruction plays in facilitating language learning and the kinds of form-focussed instruction that are of most benefit in particular circumstances. For Norris (2009, p. 580), a major contribution of task-based language teaching is that it consolidates analytic ideas from a ‘focus on forms methodology’ and experiential ideas from a ‘focus on meaning methodology’ into ‘an integrated approach’. In a similar way, the ‘communicative continuum’ mentioned above proposes a methodological framework for moving between analytic (non-communicative and pre-communicative) activities to experiential activities (structured and authentic communication).

The optimal balance between different kinds of activity from the analytic – experiential continuum remains very much an area for individual intuition. This balance will always be determined by the teacher in his or her specific context but it is also an area in which research can seek to propose new possibilities and investigate their likely effects on learning.

### 3. Exploring ways of structuring classroom interaction more effectively

A major hindrance to many teachers’ in their implementation of communication activities (or ‘tasks’) in the classroom, especially with monolingual classes at primary or secondary level, is that when students are not closely monitored, many of them revert to the mother tongue and do not challenge themselves linguistically. More effective ways need to be found of scaffolding group work (e.g., through task design features) so that these give better direction and support to independent interaction, even in the absence of direct teacher intervention. Techniques in cooperative learning (e.g., Littlewood, 2009) are an avenue for exploration.

### 4. Exploring ways to deepen and personalize the content of L2 communication in the classroom.

Much of the language use that occurs in the communication-oriented language classroom does not, as a teacher interviewed by Gong & Holliday (2013) puts it, ‘seem to touch the hearts of the students’. Pennycook (1994, p. 311) goes so far as to write of the ‘empty babble of the communicative language class’. This is an overgeneralization but it alerts us to the superficial nature of much communication in COLT classrooms, in which students are often

given a steady diet of activities like ‘planning a party’ which will never take place or ‘giving directions to the station’ on the map of a non-existent town. Gong & Holliday report on how students in a remote village in rural China were asked to talk about their weekend activities through examples such as ‘go to see a movie, go to an art museum, or go to piano lessons in a coaching school’. None of these opportunities existed in their lives and, not surprisingly, they had nothing to talk about.

Hanauer (2012, p. 106) advocates eloquently the need to put the ‘living, thinking, experiencing and feeling person at the centre of the language learning process’ and ‘make language learning a personally contextualized, meaningful activity for the learner’. The exploration of more strategies for doing this is a key task for the future of COLT. Hanauer himself proposes procedures for incorporating poetry writing. Kim (2013) uses literature-based instruction to connect language learning with the real-life experiences of the learners. Gong & Holliday (2013) emphasize the need to base tasks on content which is relevant to learners’ lives and interests and which will help them become ‘multicultural citizens’ who can communicate about their own and other cultures and express their own views. Other proposals include linking language development to other subject content (Wesche & Skehan, 2002), developing project work (Legutke & Thomas, 1991) and using drama techniques (Maley & Duff, 1978). The ‘three generations of tasks’ described by Ribé and Vidal (1993) offer a possible framework for deepening task engagement: the first ‘generation’ focuses only on communicative development, the second on communicative and cognitive development, and the third adds the dimension of global personality development. Engagement may also be encouraged through collaborative learning techniques which increase learners’ responsibility for contributing to group interaction (Littlewood, 2009; McCafferty, Jacobs & DaSilva Iddings, 2006). Zhang and Head (2010) report on a project in which a teacher was able to increase students’ sense of personal engagement by including them in joint decision-making about the topics and activities in their course. In the context of more controlled language use, there is a range of techniques for personalizing practice by relating it to students’ own identity (Griffiths & Keohane, 2000). All of these proposals provide a basis for further widening the options at teachers’ disposal.

## 5. Exploring the role of the mother tongue in the language classroom

A practical issue that engages teachers’ decision-making in the classroom almost constantly is the role (if any) that they should accord to the students’ mother tongue (see for example Littlewood & Yu, 2011 and Hall & Cook, 2012 for recent discussion of the issues). The ‘monolingual principle’ - that only the target language should be used - has been enshrined in most of the methodological proposals that have influenced language teaching over the last century and in many countries (e.g. Hong Kong and the UK) it is official policy

to use the mother tongue only as a last resort. In some other contexts, including China and Korea, teaching through the mother tongue has long been accepted practice. In Korea, of course, ‘teaching English through English’ (TETE) has been a controversial topic for debate since it became official policy over 10 years ago. Jeon (2008) and Kim (2008) survey the diverging views of teachers after five years of TETE. Park and Manning (2012) report on their own empirical study of L1 use in a primary school.

The monolingual principle is now questioned on a number of grounds. Few people would disagree that, since the classroom is the only source of input for many students, the overriding aim should be to establish the target language as the main medium of communication. To achieve this aim, however, they also acknowledge that the mother tongue can be a major resource, as it ‘launches, as it were, the pupils’ canoes into the foreign-language current’ (Butzkamm, 2003, p. 32). At the affective level it can provide psychological reassurance. In term of teaching strategies, it opens up a wide range of options at all stages. At the presentation stage, for example, it can convey meaning efficiently and enable students to progress more quickly to the stages of internalization and active use. At the practice stage, it can provide effective stimuli for students to use and expand their full foreign language competence. At the production stage, it can help to create contexts where the foreign language has a meaningful role, e.g. as students brainstorm ideas for a story in the security of their mother tongue and later write it in the foreign language. In ways such as these, the mother tongue can serve as a natural bridge between the two languages, offer a sense of ownership over learning, and help satisfy the need to personalize communication. There must be a clear policy for its use, however, to ensure that it does not take on a dominant role.

This is only a small sample of areas where research is needed. Indeed within the broad definition of COLT that has now emerged, one may say that there is no distinction between research into COLT and all other research that sets out to further an engaging, communication-oriented approach to language teaching.

## **IX. CONCLUSION: COLT AS A TRANSNATIONAL IDEOSCAPE?**

The ‘CLT attitude’ in the form criticized by Bax (2003) conceptualized CLT as a package of ideas and practices to be exported around the world. This attitude corresponds to early conceptions of globalization and modernization as unidirectional processes in which ideas and forms are transmitted from centre to periphery and, in the words of the social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1992, p. 219), ‘when the centre speaks, the periphery listens, and mostly does not talk back’. Gradually, supported by ‘the world-wide development of a new cultural self-confidence’, this unidirectional conception has been overtaken by one in which ‘inflowing cultural forms and meanings [meet] existing local forms and meanings’ and the resulting ‘creative mixture of “global” elements with local meanings and cultural forms’ leads



to innovation and diversity (Schuerkens, 2004, p. 19 and p. 23). Schuerkens characterizes this as ‘cosmopolitan conversation of humankind’ (p. 15) in which all participants have a voice.

As we continue to move further into the era of globalization, perhaps the most valuable contribution of COLT is to act not as a specific set of practices and ideas but as a transnational ‘ideoscape’ (Apparudai, 1996; Holton, 2005), that is, as an *ideational landscape* which provides a location for deepening and extending the ‘cosmopolitan conversation’ about second language pedagogy.

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