

Interactive Classroom Activities –A Communicative Language Teaching Approach

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasises the development of learners' ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real-life communication. In this context, classroom activities play a significant role in creating opportunities for meaningful interaction, active participation, and practical language use. This paper explores the effectiveness of activity-based learning in a CLT classroom, with particular focus on activities such as role plays, group discussions, pair work, information-gap tasks, debates, presentations, and problem-solving activities. These activities are designed to provide learners with opportunities to practise listening, speaking, reading, and writing in interactive contexts. The study examines how learner-centred classroom activities influence students' participation, confidence, motivation, and communicative competence. It also considers the role of the teacher as a facilitator in creating an interactive and supportive learning environment. The paper suggests that carefully planned communicative activities can enhance student engagement and provide a meaningful transition from passive language learning to active language use. The paper concludes that integrating diverse and purposeful classroom activities into CLT can contribute significantly to the development of learners' communication skills and their confidence in using English in academic and real-world contexts.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, classroom activities, communicative competence, learner-centred learning, student engagement, language learning

1. Introduction:

The main focus of any CLT activity should always be the communicative intent. Learners of a communicative classroom are involved in various communicative activities which provide them with opportunities to use the language profoundly.

Classroom Activities prescribed by Linguists:

There are various activities that may be practised in a communicative language classroom. Littlewood (1981) explains the following sequence of activities:

1. Pre communicative activities - Accuracy based activities which focus on presentation of structures, functions and vocabulary.
2. Communicative activities – Fluency based activities which focus on information sharing and information exchange.

Classroom activities are classified into various types in the book “Teaching English as a second language: Techniques and Procedures” written by Paulston and Bruder (1976):

1. Social formulas and dialogs: Personal speeches such as greetings, partings, introductions, excuses, compliments, complaints, hiding feelings etc. come under this category. It is actually difficult to communicate such feelings in a foreign language and the teachers should teach the students to use such expressions appropriately in real time situations.
2. Community oriented tasks: Activities under this category help the students to practise speech so that they are able to involve in interaction with native speakers of the language outside the classroom.
3. Problem solving activities: A problem and a few alternative solutions are given to the learners. The learners have to choose a solution to the problem or create their own solution.
4. Role plays: Students are made to take up roles of different personalities. They may even take up the role of themselves. Paulston and Bruder (1976) prescribe three basic components that are to be incorporated in the role plays. The first component is the „situation“. The teacher has to clearly explain the content by describing the scene and the plot. The teacher explains the task and the action expected. The second component is the „roles“. This refers to the list of characters that the students have to play. The third component is „useful expressions“ and this has in it, the expressions and phrases that will help the students to play their roles.

Celce-Murcia (1991) has grouped the classroom activities under four basic headings:

1. Linguistically structured activities: These activities aim at making the students practise certain linguistic structures. Meaningful contexts should be provided to practise such activities. Learners may be involved in interviews so that they practise interrogations while sharing information. Language games may be devised to make the students practise linguistic structures in an interesting way.
2. Performance activities: In this, the learners are given time to prepare beforehand and they are made to perform in the class. A discussion is made among the classmates on the performance. Peer evaluation is an effective technique in the process of language learning. Role plays and dramas are examples of performance activities.
3. Participation activities: Students are made to participate in communicative activities in natural settings. Interaction is the key term in participation activities. Group discussions, interviews, oral conversations are examples of participation activities.
4. Observation activities: Here, the learners observe the verbal and non verbal communication among the native speakers of the target language. This helps the learners to understand the use of language in real life.

As the major role of CLT is to promote fluency, Richards says (2006) that students should involve in classroom activities and by using communication strategies, they should negotiate meaning in communication. According to Richards (2006) the classroom activities should have the following features to focus on fluency:

1. Reflecting natural use of language
2. Focus on achieving communication
3. Having meaningful use of language

4. Incorporating the use of communication strategies
5. Help in producing unpredictable language
6. Linking language use to context (P.14)

It involves a great deal of preparation and planning in order to set up a successful communicative activity. The activities should revolve around the vocabulary of the learners. Some of the commonly used classroom activities are role play, interviews, information gap activities, games, language exchanges, surveys and pair work. Of these, the information gap activities are considered very important as they give every student a chance to speak in English for a period of time so that the students naturally produce speech.

The goal of these activities is to ask for and get information. It becomes necessary for the participants to interact with each other in order to reach the goal of the activity. Here, one learner has information that has to be shared with others in order to solve a problem or make a decision. Thus, information gap activities are very effective in a CLT classroom. They further make the learners feel comfortable as the communication is among the peers.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) talk about five chief characteristics of classroom activities that are employed in CLT:

1. Appropriateness: Activities should be designed in such a way that learners use the language that is appropriate to the situation. They must get enough practice to communicate in any situation be it formal, personal, cheerful, solemn etc.
2. Message focus: The CLT activities should focus on information sharing and information transfer. Learners should be able to create and comprehend messages with the real meaning.
3. Psycholinguistic processing: The CLT activities should be capable of making the learners use their cognitive skills in learning the language.
4. Risk Taking: The classroom activities should motivate the learners to guess meanings and learn from errors. They are encouraged to be creative.
5. Free Practice: The class activities should indulge the students in “holistic practice” wherein they use all the learning skills simultaneously to learn the language.

Relationship between Teachers and Students in CLT Classrooms:

There are different relationships found in the society like mother-child, doctor patient, host-guest etc. Of these the most important and often debated relationship is the teacher-student relationship. According to Wright, many times, the work people do, define their roles and sometimes the roles are defined by the quality of relationship that exists between the roles. Though teacher seems to be an occupational role, Teaching is a noble profession. Teachers define their roles in different ways depending on their personalities, background and their teaching methodology.

Teachers as Facilitators:

The teachers have to assume several roles in Communicative Language Teaching. Breen and Candlin explain the roles of teachers as follows: “The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and the texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. The latter role is closely related to the objectives of the first role and arises

from it. These rules imply a set of secondary roles for the teachers; first as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself, second as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities.....A third role for the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities.”(1980:99).

So, the teachers have three major roles. The first role is to be a facilitator and guide the communication and learning of the learners by providing opportunities for the interaction of students through meaningful activities. The role is that of a participant within an activity without controlling the activity and the third role is to be a researcher and learn the nature of learning.

As quoted by a Chinese English teacher Huang Qiang, “The teacher should curb his teacher’s instinct of explaining too much, prompting too much and correcting too much”. In traditional teaching, the teachers are the authority of the classroom and they deem it their responsibility to give the correct answers to all the students whereas in the CLT classroom the teachers make the students realize their responsibilities for their own learning. Teachers are more of a facilitator and fellow learner along with the students (Jacobs and Farrel, 2003).

According to Richards (2006), teachers shed their authoritative element and they provide opportunities to the learners so that they can communicate comfortably in a learner-centred classroom.

Learner Centred Approach:

As CLT approach is a learner- centred approach, the learner autonomy and the different learning processes are often discussed and researched upon. The role of teachers, though not detailed much, play a dominant role for the success of CLT. It is the responsibility of the teachers to provide assistance, guidance and direction for learning (Li, 1984). The students should travel the journey of learning and the teacher will be a co-traveller offering help, advice and feedback whenever necessary. So the teachers will design activities and monitor the performances while the students are the real performers.

According to Littlewood (1981), the teachers have to play the roles of coordinator, manager of activities, language instructor, source of the target language, consultant, participant and even more whenever need arises. The teacher assumes the roles of facilitator, manager of classroom activities, advisor, co-communicator, needs analyst, counsellor, researcher and learner.

Deckert (2004) says, “CLT approach features low profile teacher roles, frequent pair work or small group problem solving, students responding to authentic samples of English, extended exchanges on high interested topics, and the integration of the four basic skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing”(p.13). He also mentions that CLT does not support pervasive teacher-controlled drills, recitation of memorized material and explanation of the forms of English.

All these don’t mean that the teachers totally stay out of students’ communication. In the traditional methods of teaching, the focus is on the learning materials and the answers. The interpretation of the learning material and the answers to questions are given by the teachers even before the learners try to become familiar with the learning material. So, ultimately it is the teachers who actually learn.

The teachers of CLT give guidance, monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the learners and cater to their language learning needs and involve in the interaction among the learners. They also notice the errors of the learners and clarify them without making the learners feel unsafe, threatened and defensive. In very olden days teachers were equivalent to God. In gurukula system, the word guru had a magical impact on the students. Students stayed with the teacher and there were students who almost sacrificed their lives to impress the teachers. Teachers were given a divine image. They were literally worshipped and anything advocated by them was unanimously accepted and followed. Later on they were looked on as masters of whom the students were afraid. The students were expected to respect the teacher and it was believed that whatever the teacher said would be the ultimate truth. But now, the trend is totally different. Students are already well informed and teachers are not their only source of knowledge or information. They don't hesitate to question the ideas of teachers. They are not ready to blindly accept things without any proof. They look at teachers as guides who facilitate their learning. In such a scenario CLT will be the best method of teaching.

Many learners who can and know to speak English remain silent and passive because of the presence of criticizing teachers. Teachers involved in CLT should take up the role of facilitators. They should create an atmosphere which is conducive to autonomous learning. Students should be encouraged to communicate freely without any inhibition. The mental block in the minds of the learners is mainly because of the fear of mistakes. The teacher should target at the fear and help the learners shed away the fear on their own. It should be made clear that mistakes indicate progress in the learning process. Initially learners may be permitted to make any number of mistakes while communicating.

Mistakes should not be a hurdle for the fluency. The learners will thus aim at making the listener understand what they are communicating. Communication is nothing but sharing of thoughts and ideas. Such communicative contexts should be created by the English teachers where the students will get an opportunity to communicate spontaneously and naturally. Teachers should not be authoritative rather they should give assurance to the learners that they are there to guide and help the learners attain communicative competence. The teacher should almost take up the role of a mother who helps her child in acquiring the mother tongue. Speaking opportunities should be given to the learners and most of the time the teachers have to be silent observers. Any intervention or error correction may obstruct the fluency of the speaker as they become conscious of the presence of the teacher. The teacher should consciously promote the unconscious language acquisition of the learners. Students may be divided into groups because a student may feel easy and comfortable to speak amidst a small group. Another key word for success is „appreciation“. It works like a health drink in boosting up the energy of the learners. Teachers should be magnanimous enough to wholeheartedly appreciate the learners whenever they make a sincere effort.

Both the teachers and the learners should clearly understand that language is a skill which has to be acquired but not taught. Teachers as facilitators can help and guide in this process of acquisition. The primary role of learners is to be active participants within the classroom to acquire effective communication. Learners in CLT classrooms are not independent. They rely on each other to achieve communication. The learners are to a great extent responsible for their own learning. They should be patient listeners so that they listen to their peers and engage in communication. They should shed off

their traditional beliefs about teacher and teaching. They should not expect the teacher to spoon feed them. They are supposed to be free from the authoritative grip of the teachers. The teacher should be looked upon as a facilitator who guides in the process of learning. Learners should be cooperative and play the roles of the speakers and listeners.

The success of communication depends on the cooperative work of the learners. Learners of CLT usually work together without blaming each other. Learners are no longer passive recipients like in the traditional methods of teaching. They are active participants involving themselves in various activities related to communication. According to Larsen Freeman (1986), they learn to communicate through communication.

According to Johnson and Johnson (1999) the learners should possess the following qualities:

1. **Positive Interdependence:** The students should work together to reach their learning goals and should at the same time be responsible for the learning of their fellow learners. There is no chance for any dominance or individual victory. The harmonious cooperation will maximize the result and effectiveness of the learning process.
2. **Individual Accountability:** The learners should involve themselves in the group and do their task as much as possible and contribute to the learning process of the group. The task must be equally shared among the learners and nobody should be idle depending on the other members of the group. Only when there is individual accountability, the slow learners can be identified and given special attention. The learners work for their own credit and improvement without travelling on the back of others.
3. **Promotive Interaction:** Every student should be an interactive member ready to create an interactive atmosphere in the classroom. The features involved in promotive interaction are on-going conversation, dialogue, exchange and support. The learners should realize that face to face interactions are very helpful in the process of learning a language. They should be made to indulge in such interactions.
4. **Group Processing:** The learners play specific roles and they together find out the strong and weak members in the group. The learners work together to improve the performance of the group by concentrating on each individual.

2. Conclusion:

On the whole, the teachers and students should play their roles in a cooperative and interactive manner in a CLT classroom. It is in the hands of both the teachers and the learners to together create a conducive and effective atmosphere for language learning. Students should also understand their roles as they are the protagonists of the system. They should believe that the teachers are not controllers but only participants in the language learning process. They should develop their own interest and actively involve themselves in communication. They should interact as much as possible and get into the practical use of the language. They need not be conscious of the mistakes in grammar, accent, vocabulary or pronunciation. They may be contented if they are able to communicate their ideas in such a way that the listener comprehends. Listening and speaking are closely linked with one another and so they should listen to lot of English. This will automatically make them utter words and sentences that they often hear. Communication skill can be acquired and fine-tuned by continuous practice. The interest and involvement of the students in communicating in English will effectively promote the

learning process. The students should also understand their responsibility in the process and render their cooperation to the teachers. If there is effort from both the teacher and the student the learning will be fruitful.

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