

What is the Principled Communicative Approach?

In writing this book, we have been guided by two convictions. First, we believe that modern language instruction in general should follow broadly communicative principles, which is how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has traditionally been understood. Second, we also believe that CLT, which was originally launched in the 1970s, could do with some revitalisation in order to make it more fitting for the 21st century. There have been considerable developments in applied and psycholinguistics since the turn of the new millennium, and these should be reflected in the way we conceive and then put into practice communicative principles. The most important theoretical advances in this area were described by Zoltán in his 2009 book, *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition* (especially in the final chapter, “The Psychology of Instructed Second Language Acquisition”), and he summed up the practical implications of his findings in seven broad principles, each of which was based on scientific considerations (see Dörnyei, 2013). Zoltán referred to this upgrade of CLT as the “Principled Communicative Approach”, and the main objective of the current volume is to bring this approach to life by offering a range of practical classroom activities that embody the seven principles.

Why do we need a new approach to CLT?

Over the past decades CLT has become a cornerstone of language teaching methodology, but curiously, the specific content of the teaching approach has remained rather elusive. As Littlewood (2011: 541) pointed out, “A recurrent comment about communicative language teaching is that nobody knows what it is”. This curious situation was not the result of classroom practitioners failing to keep up with scholarly guidelines, but rather the absence of any authoritative guidelines. Indeed, Richards and Rodgers (2001: 155) have been right to point out about CLT that “There is no single text or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative”. We should also add that this vagueness is not a new phenomenon regarding CLT. Ever since the genesis of the method in the early 1970s, its proponents have developed a very wide range of variants that were only loosely related to each other. This was caused – as we shall see below – by the fact that while CLT had a firm and elaborate linguistic foundation, the psychological understanding of how to convey the linguistic content was rather imprecise. Therefore, while language teaching experts and materials writers became increasingly clear about what linguistic aspects of the second/foreign language (L2) to focus on, there were no firm guidelines on *how* best to present and teach this language content. It is fair to say that before the turn of the millennium there was no attempt to bring CLT in line with the theoretical advances of the psychology of learning in general and second language acquisition in particular. This underdeveloped psychological dimension inevitably led to diverse practical interpretations, of which the best-known example is the disagreement among experts about how to teach *grammar*. Before we present our proposal for reform, let us take a brief tour of the historical development of CLT, as this will allow us to indicate where the roots of the current confusion are.

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A brief history of Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative language teaching was introduced at the beginning of the 1970s by British and American scholars to promote the teaching of communicative skills in modern language education, and especially in the teaching of English as a global language. Although the method was seen by many as a counterreaction to the audiolingual method that dominated the field in the 1960s, the main goal of CLT – to develop functional communicative L2 competence – was not unlike the primary audiolingual objective. However, CLT pursued the communicative agenda in a radically different manner from its predecessor: instead of trying to build up L2 knowledge through techniques inspired by behaviourism such as drilling and rote learning, CLT methodology was centred around authentic communication. The emphasis was on the learner's participatory experience in meaningful L2 interaction in (often simulated) communicative situations, which was seen as essential for preparing them for future communication in real-life contexts. The approach underscored the significance of designing less structured and more creative language tasks with as many authentic elements as possible. For this reason, the traditional processing of scripted coursebook dialogues was replaced by games, problem-solving tasks, discussions and unscripted situational role-play activities, and the infamous hallmark of audiolingualism, pattern drilling, was either completely abandoned or was replaced by 'communicative drills'. As a result, the communicative L2 classroom became a potentially more stimulating and less cognitively dull environment than the typical learning context associated with audiolingualism (let alone grammar-translation).

From a theoretical point of view, the difference between the audiolingual approach and CLT was one of orientation. Audiolingualism was associated with a specific *learning theory* – adapted from behaviourist psychology – and was therefore the first language teaching method that consciously aspired to build on the principles of the psychology of learning. In contrast, the communicative reform in the 1970s was motivated by developments in modern linguistics. When some of the shortcomings of the original CLT proposals became obvious in the 1990s, most attempts for improvement concentrated on strengthening the linguistic foundation of the method. This trend was well reflected in Nina Spada's (2007: 271) summary:

'most second language educators agree that CLT is undergoing a transformation – one that includes increased recognition of and attention to language form within exclusively or primarily meaning-oriented CLT approaches to second language instruction'.

It was in this vein that Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltán Dörnyei and Sarah Thurrell (1997, 1998) first introduced the concept of a "principled communicative approach" (PCA) in the second half of the 1990s. This involved extending the systematic treatment of language issues traditionally restricted to sentence-bound rules (i.e. grammar) to the explicit development of other knowledge areas and skills necessary for efficient communication. Drawing on a number of theoretical strands such as Austin and Searle's *speech act theory*, Dell Hymes' model of *communicative competence* and its application to L2 proficiency by

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Canale and Swain, as well as Halliday's *systemic functional grammar*, they proposed detailed checklists for each of the main facets of communicative competence and argued that these components should be systematically and directly targeted by CLT tasks.

Looking back, the proposed linguistic fine-tuning pointed in the right direction, but as we have seen, it lacked a crucial element: complementing the linguistic innovations with a matching psychological conception of L2 learning. Indeed, the only learning-specific 'principle' that was available for CLT materials developers and practitioners was the broad and rather vague tenet of *learning through doing*, coupled with the only marginally less ambiguous guideline of developing the learners' communicative competence through *seeking situational meaning*. Scholars used these terms widely and people seemed to understand their main gist, but in retrospect we can say that the exact meaning of these terms was never explicitly explained or operationalized. Instead, the general conception underlying learning within a CLT framework was confined to the widespread assumption that learners' communicative competence develops automatically through active participation in meaningful communicative tasks. This made intuitive sense; after all, children master their first language this way, so what could go wrong? As it turned out, quite a lot. Let us illustrate the various dilemmas in CLT by looking at two central aspects of the method: the development of grammar and fluency.

Grammar and the implicit/explicit learning dichotomy

Many followers of CLT have tended to associate the method with a basically 'no-grammar' or at least 'not-a-lot-of-grammar' approach, epitomised by Krashen's (1982) *Input Hypothesis*, which downplayed the conscious teaching of grammatical rules and foregrounded the provision of meaningful, comprehensible input as the driving force of effective L2 instruction. The argument was that because children do not focus on grammar as they acquire their L1, a strong emphasis on grammar is not essential, and can even be distracting, as far as the development of communicative skills are concerned. This position gained support from the recognition that in real-life communication grammatical accuracy is not essential – after all, does it really matter if we get a tense wrong as long as we are understood?

Other CLT proponents, however, disagreed with this view, and interestingly this group included most of the founding fathers and mothers of the method. If we re-read the early documents of the communicative approach, we find that most of the original CLT theoreticians were quite keen to emphasize salient structural linguistic components, as illustrated, for example, by the initial sentence of Littlewood's highly influential teaching methodology text – *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction* (1981): "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view." Not only did this group of scholars not think that including grammar would undermine the effectiveness of communicative language teaching, they believed that a focus on accuracy was an essential part of the method.

These contrasting stances regarding grammar corresponded to a well-known psychological dichotomy, that of *implicit* versus *explicit learning*. *Explicit learning* refers to the learner's conscious and deliberate attempt to master some material or solve a problem. This is the learning type emphasized by most school instruction. In contrast, *implicit learning* involves acquiring skills and knowledge without conscious awareness, that is, automatically and often with no intentional attempt to learn them. Naturalistic language acquisition (e.g. picking up a language while staying in the host environment) clearly falls under this latter category, and as we saw earlier, the emerging view of a typical communicative classroom was that it should approximate a naturalistic learning context as closely as possible, thereby providing plenty of authentic input to feed the students' implicit learning processors. Undoubtedly, this view was to a large extent motivated by the fact that the main language learning model for humans – the mastery of our mother tongue – predominantly involves implicit processes without any explicit teaching; quite amazingly, children acquire the incredibly complex system of their L1 entirely through engaging in natural and meaningful communication with their parents and other caretakers, without receiving any tuition whatsoever, not even systematic corrective feedback. The implicit nature of this process is evidenced by the fact that most people cannot explain the rules of their mother tongue once they have mastered them.

Relying on the implicit learning model that nature has provided would indeed be a comfortable and straightforward solution when mastering an L2. Unfortunately, however, while implicit language processing does a great job in generating native-speaking L1 proficiency in children, it does not seem to work efficiently later when we want to acquire an additional language within institutional contexts. Unguided learning through mere exposure to natural language input does not seem to lead to sufficient progress in L2 attainment for most school-age and adult learners! This was demonstrated very clearly by the accumulated experiences in immersion programmes – seen by many as an instructional approach that offers optimal conditions for implicit L2 learning – which indicated that immersion school students generally fail to acquire native-like proficiency in the L2. Accordingly, most scholars gradually came to agree with Lightbown and Spada's (2006: 176) conclusion that “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”.

If relying on implicit learning is not the answer, we are left with the alternative option that for best effect, L2 language learning needs to be scaffolded by some form of focused explicit instruction. The crucial question is how this scaffolding can be achieved without jeopardizing the benefits of the communicative approach. It is not a question of advocating a back-to-grammar-translation method, so the challenge is to find ways of maximizing the *cooperation* between explicit and implicit learning. Finding a theoretically sound and practically achievable response has been the main motivation behind developing the Principled Communicative Approach.

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Communicative fluency

Everybody who has ever tried to speak in a foreign language knows that the accurate use of linguistic form is not the only, and very often not the most serious, concern with regard to communicative effectiveness. In many respects, *communicative fluency* is more significant and the implicit-explicit dichotomy discussed above also plays a crucial role in understanding this aspect of communication. In the literature of the psychology of language learning, fluency is usually discussed under the broader concept of “automaticity/automatization”, and the promotion of fluency is usually subsumed under “skill learning theory”. Thus, from a psychological point of view the relevant issue to explore is how L2 skills can be automatized.

Let us briefly look at the main tenets of *skill learning theory* because they illustrate how both explicit and implicit processes are necessary for the successful mastery of L2 communicative competence. Skill learning theory holds that the automatization of any skill, including language skills, requires implicit – or *procedural* – knowledge. Although this theory is consistent with Krashen’s (1982) proposal that communicative competence relies on implicit (acquired) knowledge, it contradicts Krashen’s theory by positing that in order to build up an implicit knowledge base, one has to start out by receiving explicit knowledge. The development of any skill (driving, knitting, playing tennis, etc.) needs to start with some initial explicit – or *declarative* – input, which in turn becomes gradually *automatized* through repetition. Thus, even though the ultimate goal of skill-learning is to arrive at automatized, implicit knowledge, a systematically designed fluency-building sequence is made up of an initial explicit teaching stage and subsequent practice, further divided into *controlled* and *open-ended* practice:

- 1 The *declarative input stage* provides clear and concise rules as well as sufficient examples that the learner can then interpret and rehearse, to raise explicit awareness of the skill to be internalized.
- 2 The *controlled practice stage* should offer opportunities for abundant repetition within a narrow context. “Narrow” is a key attribute here because the proceduralization of explicit knowledge requires a great deal of repetition, not unlike the way a musician practises a piece again and again. Therefore, the key to the effectiveness of this stage is to design drills that are engaging rather than demotivating.
- 3 The *open-ended practice stage* involves the continuous improvement in the performance of a skill that is already well established in a more varied and less structured applicability range.

Skill-learning theory has been validated by extensive psychological research (see DeKeyser and Criado, 2013a; Dörnyei, 2009), and interestingly, the sequence of *declarative input* → *controlled practice* → *open-ended practice* is reminiscent of the well-known methodological progression of *presentation* → *practice* → *production* (PPP).

The seven main principles of the Principled Communicative Approach (PCA)

The previous discussion has indicated that the real challenge for language teaching methodology in the 21st century is to specify the nature of the optimal cooperation between explicit and implicit learning processes in a systematic manner. Working out all the details of a new, principled communicative approach is clearly an ongoing process, but we can formulate some key guiding principles for the approach. Dörnyei (2009) offered seven maxims, which are in accordance with the state of the art of current psycholinguistic research:

- 1 *The personal significance principle:* the PCA should be meaning-focused and personally significant. This has been the basic tenet of student-centred, communicative language teaching and we believe that this principle is just as valid now as when it was first formulated.
- 2 *The declarative input principle:* To facilitate automatization, the PCA should involve explicit initial input components that are then 'proceduralized' through practice.
- 3 *The controlled practice principle:* While the overall aim of CLT is to prepare learners for meaningful communication, skill learning theory suggests that the PCA should also include controlled practice activities to promote the automatization of L2 skills.
- 4 *The focus on form principle:* While maintaining an overall meaning-oriented approach, the PCA should also pay attention to the formal/structural aspects of the L2 that determine accuracy and appropriateness at the sentence, discourse and pragmatic levels.
- 5 *The formulaic language principle:* the PCA should include the teaching of formulaic language (e.g. fixed expressions, idioms, set phrases, collocations) as a featured component. There should be sufficient awareness raising of the significance and the pervasiveness of formulaic language in real-life communication, and selected phrases should be practised and recycled intensely.
- 6 *The language exposure principle:* the PCA should offer extensive exposure to large amounts of L2 input that can feed the learners' implicit learning mechanisms. In order to make the most of this exposure, learners should be given some explicit preparation in terms of pre-task activities, to prime them for maximum intake.
- 7 *The focused interaction principle:* the PCA should offer learners ample opportunities to participate in genuine L2 interaction. For best effect, such communicative practice should always have a specific formal or functional focus, and should always be associated with target phrases to practise.

Each of these principles will be explored in a separate chapter, starting with a brief theoretical overview and then presenting practical ideas on how to implement the principles in classroom tasks. Let us conclude this introduction by reiterating that the essence of the Principled Communicative Approach is the integration of meaningful communication with relevant declarative input and the automatization of both linguistic rules and lexical items. By applying the right principles to teaching L2 skills we can significantly increase in the effectiveness of the learning process.