

# Second Language Acquisition in a Spanish Classroom: The Implement of Communicative Language Teaching

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**Abstract.** Second language acquisition, also known as SLA or L2 acquisition, is a process which people learn a second language. Second language acquisition on one hand is a product of various factors related to the learner and learning situation on the other. Although the individuality and variability during language acquiring process is inevitable, the study of second language acquisition still possesses universality and practicability. As many scholars viewed the language learning as a natural thing, there also exists considerable studies about the second language acquisition in classroom, which overlaps with language education. The emphasis of classroom second language acquisition is the influence of instruction on the learners.

This essay, with a theory basis on communicative language teaching, analyses the acquisition of Spanish in a classroom, the relationship between the language teaching and the second language acquisition. Moreover, the evaluation of the approaches which aim for fulfilling the communicative purpose modify the whole language acquisition process

**Keywords:** Second language acquisition; Language education; Communicative language teaching.

## 1. Introduction

The communicative language (CLT) teaching with an emphasis on the communicative competence now has become a mainstream in a second language teaching classroom. Communicative language teaching is an approach which emphasizes the importance of interaction for the implement of teaching means and the realization of ultimate study goal. Hinkel (2011) stated that the aim of CLT is not limited on the language accumulation but strengthen the practical purpose- the ability to communicate. There exist many issues students encountered during their second language learning process. Specifically, the learners sometimes could not employ the language in an integrate, appropriate and flexible way, which shows the necessity of implementing the communicative language teaching.

This essay will firstly explain the theoretical framework of communicative language teaching, then, combined with personal experience of learning Spanish in UK, critically analyze the diverse aspects and specific approaches of CLT which being employed by the language teachers. In addition, the evaluations and implications of communicative language teaching implemented in a second language class will be discussed.

## 2. Communicative Competence, Communicative Activities and Communicative Criteria

### 2.1 Communicative Competence and Features of CLT

Communicative competence is a term coined by Dell Hymes in 1971, who reacted to the Chomsky's (1965) distinction between "competence" and "performance". Hymes stated that "communicative competence" should include not only grammatical competence, but also "communicative form and function in integral relation to each other". Canale and Swain (1980) developed the term by three components: the grammatical competence (words and rules), the sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness) and strategic competence (appropriate use of communication strategies). Canale (1983) added the discourse competence (cohesion and coherence)

to modify its definition. Hedge's later five main components of communicative competence also been welcomed by dividing it as linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency. (Hedge, 2000). Scholars believe that the balanced development of language knowledge and non-language knowledge (context knowledge, social knowledge and intercultural knowledge) will promote the communicative competence. Fang (2011) explained that the communicative competence is an ability to use language and "sub-language" to achieve communicative purpose. Personally, by fostering the competence, students potentials could be fully developed, and language skills will be comprehensively strengthened. The goal of CLT is cultivating the communicative competence of students by using the targeted language (Savignon, 1997). Therefore, unlike the traditional teaching with an emphasis on grammar competence, the CLT which cultivates both the "notion" and "function" bridges the gap between the traditional language class and real life.

The main characters of communicative language teaching always compared with the traditional pedagogy. Richards and Rodgers (2001) pointed out that what had been neglected in previous teaching approaches is not "communication", but "active". This means the most prominent feature of CLT is active, which Savignon (1991) emphasized that instead of viewing the learner as a passive role, they actually actively participate in negotiations during the whole learning process. The activeness and independence of learning are encouraged and therefore the cultivation of communicative competence could be realized (Fang, 2011). Another feature of CLT is contextual. All the learning objectives with a contextualized discourse is of great significance to learners (Celce-Furcia, 2008). The contextualized discourse refers to the content which links with real life. Dtaz-Campos (2004) also stated that the context of learning positively facilitate the second language learning.

In a word, CLT with an aim of cultivating communicative competence, which is a balanced development of language and language use. Moreover, the CLT emphasizes both the learner-centered teaching process and the context-oriented course, that will motivate the learners' active learning and modify the SLA process.

### 2.1.2 A personalized experience of Communicative Classroom Activities

I have enrolled in a Beginners' Spanish course once, without any basis of Spanish vocabulary and grammar. The students form in our class is diverse, most of them are British, a few Chinese and a Turkish, an Indian, a Korean. In addition, we all from different majors and programs. Therefore, how to minimize the influence of different background and mostly facilitate each students' SLA experience are of great importance for our language teacher. After a semester's study, I discovered that our teacher organized a wide range of activities to modify our learning process, and which is consistent with the communicative criteria in CLT.

The vocabulary for acquiring a new language is essential. Every lesson our teacher would hand out each of us a paper, which could be divided as A and B based on content. Take the study of professions' vocabulary as an example, above each blank (half blanks already with a Spanish word), there is a picture related to the profession in case that we could ask each other the Spanish word for the vocation. Then the teacher provided us the question- "¿cómo se dice () en español?", which means "how to say () in Spanish?". Then the partners begun to communicate each other to fill the blanks with the role shifting during the practice. In addition, we all know that the Spanish words are divided into masculine and feminine. Actually, during the communication process, the teacher would walk around the class and answered the questions raised by us. The teacher only interfered our discussion when we asked. So almost every group asked the teacher the distinction between the masculine and feminine words. Moreover, after having learnt the expressions of professions, teacher then informed us how to ask others' occupations -¿A que te dedicas? and how to express ourselves-soy estudiante de (educación) /soy trabajo de (cocinero). After dialoging with each other, both our oral language ability and grammar competence could be enhanced. Such an activity-information gap will be organized almost every time to train our speaking ability and teamworking.

Role-play also toughed out our weekly schedules. The instructor will set diverse occasions with a basis on daily teaching goals and the textbook. The role will be told as well as the occasion. An example can better explain this activity. When we learned the plural and singular form of demonstratives in Spanish, its similarity and flexibility demanded us to employ a new method so as to grasp it. The teacher set us an occasion of shopping, one would be the customer and the other would be the friend of the customer. A number of Spanish words about clothing are given, combined with the demonstratives, the conversation as follows:

A: ¿cuáles son más bonitas? ¿estas o estas?

B: Las verdes.

A: ¿cual es mas barato? ¿este o este?

B: El gris.

By playing the role-play, the appropriate and correct use of these words would be examined. Besides, both “context” and “authentic” employ of targeted language could be achieved.

Scavenger hunt also was being introduced in our language class. A scavenger hunt is a mingling activity which allows the student to interact with the whole class. Which, from my view, is a bring-in of our real social occasions. From the personal details sheet, the hobby sheet, life routine sheet and so on, we begin to know more about each other and being comfortable talking and sharing during the L2 learning process. Such a network-like activity enriches our vocabulary, promoting our communicative competence and expanding our language network.

These communicative activities greatly modified my whole second language learning process. Unlike my past SL learning experience, our Japanese teacher simply made us to rote, prioritized the grammar and spelling, which leads to the language we learned being isolated from its context and the whole process being operated in an inefficient way. Foreover, because of the innovation and development of communicative activities are diverse and flexible, the analysis of the implementing criteria could offer the teacher a basic guideline and better carried out the CLT.

### 2.1.2 Communicative Criteria for Classroom Activities

Littlewood (2013) stated that the CLT as an umbrella term is hardly to be precisely defined and implemented. Therefore, the basic principles of CLT should be developed in order to fit each teacher’ specific teaching context. Ellis (1999) worked six criteria for classroom activities based on research into SLA:

- Communicative purpose
- Communicative desire
- Focus on content, not form
- Variety of language
- No teacher intervention
- No materials control

Let’s analyze these principles in detail. The communicative purpose refers to activities organized by teachers must serve a real communicative purpose instead of just practicing the language skills, like the information gap, students seek to fill the “knowledge blanks” when they are communicating. The communicative desire is easier to understand, the students must in a real need to communicate, no matter the need is from own desire or the external stimulus. Sometimes the external stimulus is controllable, which Littlewood (2013) suggested that L2 teachers could create a suitable learning environment and pay attention to learners’ motivations. Surprisingly, the emphasis of activities is “content” which seems against the mainstream understanding. The value this principle embodied is the exchange of information, instead of focusing on the pattern practice. When students are participating the activity, they must realize the comprehensible input and deliver the productive message.

The employ of a wide range language could promote both interacting ability and linguistic competence. The activities designed by instructors must enable students to be involved in a flexible language learning context. Instead of obeying one rigid form, the students should freely improvise and create. In addition, the teacher’ role in a CLT classroom always being discussed. Forrow (1981)

stated that a teacher should be an instigator to liven up the classroom atmosphere and be a participant to engage in the students' discussions. While based on Ellis' study, the teacher should only get involved when students are seeking assistance. But this meanwhile caused the introvert usually being forgot. Kumaradivelu (2003) also pointed out that teachers should promote the learner autonomy and "activate students' intuitive capacity for an independent discovery". This ensures the co-existence of learners' creativity and teachers' facilitating role. Besides, the teachers probably should not evaluate or correct during the communicating process, but later to synthesize the common mistakes made by students. The final point "no materials control", which based on my view, means that activities should be flexible, and the learning materials should be able to be extended.

## 2.2 Challenges and Implications for Implementing CLT

The shift from a traditional teacher-centered pedagogy to a student-centered communicative language teaching requires the joint efforts of both teachers and students. The teachers' role from a lecturer to a facilitator is facing potential challenges. A typical one is classroom-level restrictions. An active and student-oriented class sometimes will prone to lose control. Littlewood (2013) argued that a practical challenge of implementing CLT is the difficulty of managing the classroom order. How to ensure a systematical and efficient carry-out in order is a tricky issue. Especially in China, the large size of second language class (usually 40-60 students) and the limited resources may result a situation of out of order and delay the learning process. Lantolf and Yáñez (2003) founded that some students will begin private speech in their mother language or content-irrelated topic, which make a discount of the outcome of CLT.

The society and institution also limit the popularization of CLT. To be more specific, the examination systems as well as the evaluations of its teaching outcomes. The examination systems of second language always emphasized on the writing and reading, which forces the students to pursue a traditional rote way. Foreover, a lot of variables should be considered when we are evaluating the students' performance, the complexity and incompatibility with public assessment demands to some extent inhabit the perform of CLT.

While these challenges also inspired us to modify the communicative language teaching. Instead of simply employing CLT in a second language class, we could adopt a diverse approach to better enhance our language competence. A study in Turkish shown that most students favored a combination of communicative teaching and non-communicative teaching (İnceçay & İnceçay, 2009). By conducting more interact activities and receive more creative feedbacks among students, a great number of teachers now integrate the teaching approach in their own pedagogy. They still keep the traditional elements in their approach, such as their role as a knowledge transmitter, the instant offer of grammar rules and the employ of the pattern drills, but they also adopted the newly interacting activities to minimize the negative influences caused by traditional "structural" approach.

A rising number of examinations will take the speaking competence of a student into consideration, even the CLT not only promoting the speaking ability, which may remove some restrictions of the implement of CLT. Foreover, Norris and Ortega (2000) suggested a more comprehensive assessment to evaluate students' outcome. The overall results of "a metalinguistic judgement (a grammatical text), selected response (multiple choice), constrained constructed response (gap filling exercises) and free constructed response (a communicative task)" could precisely assist the teacher having a more comprehensive understanding of learner's second language acquisition. This kind of assessment provides a direct feedback of students learning outcomes and also their invisible potentials.

### 3. Summary

CLT provides us a student-oriented teaching approach which greatly promotes the communicative competence of L2 learners. As Vygotsky (1987) stated that the acquisition of a person's mother language and later-learned second language processed in an opposite way,

“the development of the native language begins with free and spontaneous use of speech and ends with conscious awareness and mastery of the speech forms. In contrast, the development of the foreign language begins with conscious awareness and volitional mastery of language and culminates in free, spontaneous speech.” (pp,221).

Which appropriately depicted the perfect state of learning a second language is being free to express. The ultimate goal of CLT emphasizes the cultivation of communicative competence, by carrying out the communicative activities to modify our learning experience. More importantly, the teachers nowadays are adapting this pedagogy to suit the diverse context instead of simply adopting CLT. The future studies of CLT still have a long way to go, take the personalized teaching method and content as an example, if the CLT focus on the learners' autonomy, then how to cope with the introvert students' personality or some students just afraid of exposing their troubles still requires our attention. Besides, an updated teaching material would better serve for the communicative purpose. CLT would cast a positive influence on second language acquisition only we contextualized it.

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