

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Practice

Dr Lal C A

Professor and Head
Institute of English
University of Kerala
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala
lalca.ku@gmail.com

and

Sherly C Thomas

Principal
Sacred Heart Institute of Teacher Education
Mylapra, Kerala

Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has transformed language education by prioritising interaction, real-life communication, and learner-centred strategies over rote memorisation and grammatical drills. By incorporating role-plays, collaborative tasks, and authentic materials, CLT develops linguistic competence, fluency, comprehension, and confidence, enabling learners to use language effectively across diverse contexts. While its practical orientation bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, challenges persist, particularly in countries like India, where grammar-focused methods and exam-oriented practices often limit opportunities for functional language use. This article examines the implementation of CLT, its classroom strategies, and contextual challenges, highlighting the pedagogical measures necessary to achieve meaningful language acquisition and learner autonomy.

Key Terms: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), second language acquisition, grammatical competence vs. communicative competence, purpose of language learning, classroom implementation strategies, challenges in implementing CLT, issues with grammar-centric learning, language learning challenges in the Indian context.

Communicative Language Teaching in Practice

Mastery of language is measured not by the knowledge of rules, but by the ability to convey and understand meaning. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) builds on this principle, by transforming classrooms into spaces for authentic interaction, where

learners participate in dialogues, discussions, and problem-solving activities that mirror real-world communication. In this approach, grammatical accuracy supports rather than dominates learning, enabling students to balance structural knowledge with functional application. The ultimate goal of second-language learning is communicative competence - the ability to use language effectively in real-life contexts. CLT emphasises this practical use, integrating linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies, and aligning classroom activities with authentic communicative purposes. By prioritising interaction and meaningful language use, CLT equips learners not only with fluency but also with the confidence and skills required for both academic and social engagement.

Communicative Language Teaching: From Theory to Practice

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as a response to structural and grammar-translation methods that prioritised rote memorisation and formal accuracy over actual language use. Rooted in functional and sociolinguistic views of language, CLT reconceptualised language learning as a process of meaning-making through interaction rather than the mechanical mastery of forms. The emphasis shifted from knowledge *about* language to the ability to *use* language appropriately in real communicative contexts.

At its core, CLT seeks to bridge the long-standing gap between linguistic theory and classroom practice. While traditional approaches often confined language learning to controlled drills and decontextualised exercises, CLT foregrounds purposeful communication, learner participation, and contextual relevance. This theoretical shift redefined the classroom as a site of interaction, where language is acquired through use, negotiation of meaning, and social engagement, rather than passive reception (Wilkins 83-89).

Emerging as a response to grammar oriented traditional methods that prioritised formal accuracy over practical use, CLT views language primarily as a tool for communication (Richards 15). Traditional grammar-focused approaches emphasise accuracy often at the expense of communicative ability, whereas CLT prioritises fluency, with accuracy serving a supportive role (Richards & Rodgers 102; Savignon 161). It emphasises interaction, real-life contexts, and fluency, with accuracy treated as

supportive rather than central to learning (Ellis 22). Through the use of authentic materials, task-based activities, and learner-centred practices, CLT enables learners to use language effectively across varied communicative situations. Despite challenges related to assessment and classroom implementation, CLT continues to function as a dynamic and effective approach to the development of communicative competence (Savignon 266).

Grammatical Competence vs Communicative Competence

A central premise of CLT lies in the distinction between grammatical competence and communicative competence. The goal of language teaching requires clarification, particularly whether instruction prioritises grammatical competence or extends beyond it. Grammatical competence refers to the learner's knowledge of the rules governing a language, including sentence structure, terminology, and structural functioning. While grammatical competence involves knowledge of syntactic rules and structures, it does not by itself ensure effective communication. Learners may demonstrate high levels of formal accuracy, yet struggle to use language meaningfully in authentic situations. Such knowledge enables an understanding of how language operates as a system and can be intellectually valuable, particularly at advanced levels of study (Chomsky 4; Canale and Swain 29). However, grammatical knowledge alone does not necessarily result in effective communication. These disconnects challenge the assumption that mastery of grammar automatically leads to communicative ability, a premise that CLT explicitly questions (Celce-Murcia 42). Within the context of second language learning, communication therefore remains the primary objective, even while grammatical knowledge continues to hold academic value (Canale and Swain 6).

It needs to be made clear that all this is applicable to the initial levels of language learning, when the learner is forming and strengthening basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins 122). Once the BICS foundations are sufficiently strong, and the learner is a confident communicator in social and academic contexts, the focus will naturally shift to academic language proficiency (CALP), which is more accurate, and poised at negotiating cognitively challenging tasks and concepts. The common pedagogical error is to focus on accuracy too much at the initial stage, which

can jeopardize the development of BICS and create ripple effects throughout the learner's subsequent language development. The present attempt at clarifying the basic precepts of CLT as a powerful aide to CALP is due to the felt need for the same among ELT practitioners, particularly in the Indian context.

A deep knowledge of grammar, though valuable, does not automatically translate into communicative ability; instead, communicative competence must be developed through meaningful use across contexts, making it applicable to all languages and learning situations (Canale and Swain 7). Communicative competence encompasses not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to interpret, negotiate, and convey meaning appropriately across contexts. The long-standing debate between grammar-focused instruction and functional language use finds resolution in CLT's integrative stance, which views grammar as a resource for communication rather than an end in itself. Accordingly, form is taught in relation to meaning and use, enabling learners to develop both structural awareness and functional proficiency.

Impact of Colonial Influence on Language Teaching

Colonial influence has had a lasting impact on language teaching practices, particularly in postcolonial contexts such as India. English education during the colonial period was largely shaped by administrative and scholarly priorities, where the language functioned as a tool for governance, examination, and intellectual control rather than for everyday communication (Kachru 45). As a result, teaching methods privileged grammar, translation, and literary study, reinforcing a view of language as an academic subject rather than a living means of interaction. This legacy institutionalised teacher-centred instruction, emphasis on correctness, and reliance on written examinations, all of which continue to influence classroom practices long after independence (Phillipson 22). All this was rather innocuous and even effective when English education was limited to those who needed it as an essential vocational component. But in the later years, English became a language of every educated individual, and only a fraction of the users needed advanced academic proficiency in the language. The need of the majority turned out to be a working knowledge of the

language for social and academic communication, with the accuracy driven models proving largely detrimental to this.

The persistence of the colonial pedagogic traditions has contributed to a mismatch between language instruction and communicative needs in contemporary contexts (Howatt 10). While English now serves functional, professional, and social purposes, instructional practices often remain aligned with colonial-era models that prioritise textual knowledge and formal accuracy. This has limited the learners' exposure to authentic language use and reduced opportunities for oral interaction, thereby affecting communicative competence. Communicative Language Teaching challenges this inherited framework by repositioning language as a social practice and by emphasising use over form. Addressing the colonial legacy in language teaching, therefore, requires a conscious shift from examination-driven, grammar-centric models to approaches that reflect present-day communicative realities (Kumaravadivelu 113).

Purpose of Language Learning

CLT is not limited to English; it applies to any language learned after acquiring a mother tongue. The primary purpose of learning a language is to use it for social communication rather than for structural mastery, any scholarships, or scholarly pursuits. This distinction remains essential and needs to be remembered. Thus, a closer examination of the concept is necessary, particularly from a practical perspective (Hymes 269).

Another important distinction lies in the purpose of language learning: while some learners study a language primarily for its literature and formal features, others learn it for communicative use, marking the difference between language study and language use (Widdowson 3). For instance, when one is learning Russian to read Dostoevsky in the original text does not necessarily involve an intention to communicate with Russian speakers, either in speech or writing. In such cases, the focus is on scholarship rather than communication. In such cases, the approach to learning Russian would differ significantly. It would resemble the study of languages like Sanskrit, Latin, ancient Hebrew, or classical Greek, which are no longer used for communicative purposes, but are still learned to access and read texts written in them. This distinction

clarifies the focus of second language acquisition, where the objective of language learning is purpose-driven and oriented towards real-life communication rather than confined to purely academic contexts (Savignon 5). Accordingly, effectiveness is measured by the learner's ability to use the language beyond the classroom, in authentic social interaction.

Key Aspects of Communicative Language Teaching

In most classroom contexts, learners seek to attain a functional working knowledge of English for practical use. A definition of Communicative Language Teaching may be framed by considering the following three key aspects (Lal 02.30-09.14).

The first factor is, *'Why do we teach that particular language? Is it for scholarship or is it for daily use?'*. This shows the concerns about the purpose of language instruction: whether a language is taught for scholarly study or for everyday use. This distinction foregrounds a fundamental pedagogic question regarding the aims of language teaching. In the present context, the emphasis is on teaching English for practical, everyday communication.

The second aspect is *'How do learners learn and acquire a new language?'*. This concerns the process of language acquisition. Mother tongue acquisition occurs naturally before formal education, while second-language learning requires a different approach. The focus in L1 education pans toward the study of literature and the use of the language for more advanced purposes, since the basics have already been acquired. This progression differs from learning a second language, where foundational skills must first be established.

The third aspect is, *'What should be the goal of language teaching? Should it prioritise grammatical competence or communicative competence?'* In the case of English or any other second language, such as Hindi, Tamil, or Kannada in Kerala, or Malayalam in Tamil Nadu, the focus remains on communication. Various methods and principles of communication may apply to such contexts, and the same principles apply across different linguistic contexts. Here, the focus remains on second language learning and the need for communication.

Classroom Implementation Strategies

Implementing CLT in the classroom requires practical strategies that prioritise interaction and meaningful use of language. Pair work, group discussions, role plays, and problem-solving activities provide learners with opportunities to practise language in authentic contexts. The use of real-life materials, such as newspapers, videos, and digital resources, further enhances engagement and comprehension. Teachers facilitate language acquisition, rather than dictate knowledge, and ensure constant engagement with the target language to develop both fluency and accuracy. Balancing structural instruction with communicative practice ensures that grammatical competence supports, rather than overshadows, functional language use. Task-based learning, where students complete activities that simulate real-life communication, has proven particularly effective in fostering confidence and practical proficiency.

Continuous feedback and reflective practice play a crucial role in effective CLT implementation. Teachers should provide constructive, timely feedback that addresses both linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness, helping learners identify areas for improvement. Self-assessment and peer evaluation promote learner autonomy by enabling students to monitor their progress and develop strategies to overcome difficulties. The use of technology, including language learning apps, online discussion forums, and multimedia resources, further supports interactive learning and exposes learners to authentic language use beyond the classroom. Such approaches ensure that learners not only practise language skills actively but also gain the confidence and competence needed to use the language meaningfully in varied contexts.

Challenges in Implementing CLT

Despite its effectiveness, implementing CLT faces several challenges, particularly in contexts such as Indian secondary schools. Large class sizes and limited resources often restrict opportunities for individualised interaction. Teachers accustomed to grammar-focused methods may resist adopting learner-centred approaches, while assessment systems frequently prioritise written accuracy over communicative ability. Sociolinguistic factors, including students' home language background and motivation,

can further hinder engagement. Insufficient teacher training and lack of exposure to authentic communicative practices make consistent implementation difficult. Addressing these challenges requires systemic support, professional development, and curriculum adaptation that aligns assessment with the objectives of communicative competence.

Cultural attitudes toward language learning can also pose significant challenges. In many classrooms, students and parents continue to value rote learning and high scores over practical communication, creating pressure on teachers to prioritise exams and grammar (Richards and Rodgers 115). Limited exposure to English outside the classroom reduces opportunities for authentic practice, and learners may lack the confidence to engage in spoken interaction. Overcoming these challenges requires not only teacher training but also awareness-building among students and communities about the importance of communicative competence. Creating a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking, experimentation, and active participation is essential for CLT to achieve its full potential.

Effectiveness of Authentic Materials in Language Teaching

The use of authentic materials, such as texts, audio, and visual resources originating from real-life contexts, has proven highly effective in promoting communicative competence. Such materials expose learners to the language as it is naturally used, providing opportunities to encounter varied vocabulary, accents, and pragmatic norms that textbooks alone cannot offer (Gilmore 98). Authentic resources foster motivation and engagement by connecting classroom tasks to real-world purposes, enabling learners to negotiate meaning and develop both comprehension and production skills. Integrating these materials into task-based activities supports learner autonomy, encourages critical thinking, and cultivates the confidence needed to communicate effectively outside the classroom (Nunan 74). As a result, authentic materials serve as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical language use, aligning closely with the core principles of CLT.

In practical classroom implementation, authentic materials can be integrated into a wide range of interactive activities that mirror real-life communication. For instance, learners may analyse news articles, watch video clips, participate in role-plays based on

real scenarios, or collaborate on projects using online resources. These tasks encourage students to negotiate meaning, make linguistic choices, and apply grammar and vocabulary in context, rather than in isolation. Furthermore, the use of authentic materials supports differentiated learning, allowing teachers to tailor tasks according to students' proficiency levels, interests, and communicative goals. By situating language learning in meaningful contexts, authentic resources support engagement, promote learner autonomy, and strengthen the transfer of classroom learning to real-world communication (Gilmore 105; Nunan 76).

Issues with Grammar Centric Learning

The question arises whether the focus in second-language learning should be on grammatical competence, which refers to the ability to understand and explain the rules of a language (Lightbown and Spada 25). While grammatical knowledge can provide a strong structural foundation, it does not necessarily ensure effective practical use of the language, which remains the central aim of communicative teaching (Richards and Rodgers 102-103). Relying only on grammatical competence may result in theoretical knowledge without the ability to use the language fluently in real-life situations.

Mastering a language involves not only knowing its rules but also applying them naturally in conversation, highlighting the importance of functional language use and fluency (Brown 35). Achieving fluency enables learners to communicate effectively in real-life situations, reinforcing the ultimate goal of language learning. Without exposure to real-world usage, learners may struggle to express thoughts clearly despite strong grammatical knowledge. A strong grasp of grammar helps to construct accurate sentences, but communication depends on clarity and confidence. Language learning should balance rules with practical use to ensure effective expression in different contexts.

Although most teachers possess grammatical competence, mastering the rules of sentence formation does not necessarily enable learners to use the language effectively for meaningful communication (Thornbury 50). This presents the principle of Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasises developing learners' ability to

use the language in authentic communicative contexts rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy.

A person may master the rules of sentence formation in a language, yet still struggle to use it effectively for meaningful communication. This presents an interesting scenario. Around ten or twenty years ago, general English syllabi included a significant focus on literature and had a lot of conscious grammar learning. As a result, students who did their education during that period often have a stronger knowledge of grammar compared to the present students. This is an interesting situation. It is also notable that those with high grammatical knowledge are often not good and effective communicators. The priority should be to change students into good communicators. This issue has to be resolved as soon as possible. Grammatical competence can be acquired later if they choose. Making it optional rather than the primary focus remains an important point of consideration.

Students have different intentions in learning English. While a few may seek advanced knowledge of the language, the majority aim for a functional, working proficiency. These differences must be considered when designing classroom activities. In the context of CLT, this means prioritising interactive, task-based strategies that allow all learners to practise language meaningfully according to their goals. Pair work, group discussions, role plays, and problem-solving tasks provide opportunities for students to apply language in real-life scenarios, ensuring that even those focused on functional use develop communicative competence, while learners aiming for advanced proficiency can refine their skills within authentic interaction. If too much focus is placed on grammatical competence at this stage, communicative ability may be compromised. And this remains a fundamental issue.

Communicative competence, which refers to the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations, is central to CLT (Littlewood 14). Even learners with a high level of grammatical competence may lack this communicative ability. A common misconception that must be addressed from the outset is that strong grammatical knowledge does not automatically ensure effective communication.

Language Learning Challenges in the Indian Context

This presents a challenge, particularly in the Indian context, where foundational language skills remain underdeveloped. Input and natural acquisition challenges are especially significant in the early stages of learning (Krashen 10). Although English education begins from a very early stage, many students, even at the degree and postgraduate levels, continue to function at a beginner level, with a communicative proficiency gap (Savignon 5-6). A significant portion of learners struggle with foundational language skills. Technically or ideally, the aspects under discussion should have been addressed by the time the students enter high school, or around class seven.

By that stage, students should have already developed foundational language skills. From class seven onwards, they should ideally use English or Hindi for higher academic purposes and deal with more cognitively challenging tasks, and due to various factors, many college students still struggle with the basics. A major reason for this lies in the way English has been approached, as if students are learning it for scholarships or scholarly purposes. This has led to an emphasis on grammar and academic aspects rather than practical communication (Widdowson 3).

The central argument is that shifting the focus at all levels, starting from the primary stage, could bring a transformation or not. At the university, the higher secondary level, or high school level, this shift could help students to bridge the existing gap. It is serving as a form of remediation. A review of language instruction and refinement of its teaching methods could bring significant improvements, perhaps in the coming years, especially as big changes are already taking place. The ultimate goal of second-language teaching is for students to use English for higher academic and professional purposes (Hymes 270). With this approach, learners can achieve communicative proficiency by the time they complete school, enabling effective use of the language in real-life contexts. Currently, this is not the case, and that is why reconsidering English teaching methods remains essential.

Conclusion

Communicative Language Teaching offers a framework for transforming language learning into a practical, interaction-oriented process. Its focus on real-life communication equips learners with the skills necessary for academic, social, and

professional engagement. Effective implementation requires teachers to balance grammar instruction with functional language use, adopt task-based strategies, and facilitate authentic interaction. Policymakers and curriculum designers must support these approaches through appropriate training, resources, and assessment methods. By aligning teaching practices with the ultimate goal of communicative competence, CLT can bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use, fostering confident, capable, and independent language users.

Works Cited

- Brown, H. Douglas. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. 6th ed., Pearson, 2007.
- Canale, Michael, and Merrill Swain. "Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing." *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1980, pp. 1-47.
- Celce-Murcia, Marianne. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. 3rd ed., Heinle & Heinle, 2001.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. MIT Press, 1965.
- Cummins, Jim. "Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency, Linguistic Interdependence, the Optimum Age Question and Some Other Matters." *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, no. 19, 1979, pp. 121-29.
- Ellis, Rod. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 1997.
- Gilmore, Alex. "Authentic Materials and Authenticity in Foreign Language Learning." *Language Teaching*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2007, pp. 97-118.
- Howatt, A. P. R. *A History of English Language Teaching*. Oxford UP, 1984.
- Hymes, Dell. *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1972.
- Kachru, Braj B. *The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions, and Models of Non-native Englishes*. University of Illinois Press, 1986.

- Kumaravadivelu, B. *Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Postmethod*. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006.
- Krashen, Stephen D. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press, 1982.
- Lal, C. A. "Communicative Language Teaching in Practice" *YouTube*, uploaded by KU Padasala, 12 Jan. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAPuvA88dm8.
- Lightbown, Patsy M., and Nina Spada. *How Languages are Learned*. 4th ed., Oxford UP, 2013.
- Littlewood, William. *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*. Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Nunan, David. *Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teachers*. Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Phillipson, Robert. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford UP, 1992.
- Richards, Jack C. *The Context of Language Teaching*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Richards, Jack C., and Theodore S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. 2nd ed., Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Savignon, Sandra J. *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*. McGraw-Hill, 1991.
- Thornbury, Scott. *How to Teach Grammar*. Longman, 1999.
- Widdowson, H. G. *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford UP, 1978.
- Wilkins, D. A. *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford UP, 1976.
