

# Grammar Matters: Integrating Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching Classrooms

Siriporn Tichachart

English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Si Ayutthaya Rajabhat University  
Email : tichaharts@gmail.com

## Abstract

In the field of language education, the Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT) has been widely studied and recognized as the foreign language teaching method that aims to promote learners' communicative competence. As the core of CLT is effective communication, one of several misconceptions about this particular teaching method is that it ignores grammar teaching and focuses only on speaking. This misconception obviously conflicts with the theory of CLT that includes grammar competence as one component of the four communicative competences. This present article, therefore, aims to highlight the misconception about grammar instruction in CLT, and to discuss how grammar teaching should be taught in CLT classrooms. Furthermore, it offers some ideas of how teachers can integrate grammar through communicative activities and tasks to promote both learners' communication and learners' recognition of forms and structure.

**Keywords:** Communicative language teaching, Grammar teaching, Communicative competence, Grammatical competence

วันที่รับบทความ : 19 มกราคม 2562  
วันที่แก้ไขบทความ : 15 พฤษภาคม 2562  
วันที่ตอบรับตีพิมพ์บทความ : 20 พฤษภาคม 2562

## 1. Introduction

For more than two decades, Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT) has been renowned in the field of language education for its goal of learners' communicative achievement. Savignon [1] explained that CLT referred to the processes and goals in classroom learning which helped develop learners' communicative competence. The communicative competence is composed of four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence [2]. The integration of these components is

regarded as the essence of effective language classroom learning. This is because they can indicate the ability of language learners to interact with other speakers and to make meaning of what they attempt to communicate [3]. Therefore, it could be said that CLT is another significant teaching method that can be adapted in any communicative classrooms in order to help enable language learners to use the target language for meaningful communication.

As CLT aims to promote language learners' communicative competence, several language

teachers have misinterpreted how to employ the teaching method in their classrooms. Those teachers thought that CLT was specifically used for promoting communicative skills, especially speaking and listening skills, thus they did not have to place much importance to grammar instruction in their classrooms [4] - [7]. Moreover, the idea of Krashen [8] also supported those teachers' interpretation that forms and grammar rules can be acquired unconsciously through the learners' exposure to the target language. The ignorance of grammar instruction in CLT classrooms; however, was completely opposed to Canale [2] notion of CLT. They believed that communicative competence was the relationship and interaction between knowledge of rules of grammar, and knowledge of the rules of language use. Agreeing with Canale [2], Savignon [1], and Thomson [7], confirmed that grammar was still important to help make communication more effective. Moreover, Savignon further highlighted the significance of grammar in this way.

*“Communication cannot take place in the absence of structure, or grammar, a set of shared assumptions about how languages work, along with a willingness of participants to cooperate in the negotiation in meaning” (3, pp.7).*

The misconception of grammar instruction in CLT classrooms mentioned earlier consequently raises the question as how grammar should be taught in CLT classrooms. As Thomson [7] noted in his study on misconceptions related to CLT, the question of how learners learn the necessary grammar still remains. Moreover, according to five components of the CLT curriculum proposed by Savignon [3], it was

suggested that grammar should be blended with other components. For example, grammar being taught should relate to learners' communicative needs and interests in their contexts. Hence, it is important that teachers should seek ways to integrate grammar essential for learners with other communicative strategies and be able to teach within their classrooms.

## 2. Misconceptions of CLT

Among five misconceptions of CLT proposed by Thomson [7], the misconception of grammar teaching is prominent. From the findings of his study, teachers believed that CLT focused more on speaking a language rather than grammar. This misconception corresponded with Sato and Kleinsasser's [6] study on CLT conceptions of Japanese second language in-service teachers in Australia. The study reported that the teachers participating in the study also thought that CLT involves little grammar instruction. Moreover, the findings showed that they were uncertain about the importance of having students learn the rules of grammar.

Thirteen years later, Mareva and Mapako's [5] qualitative study similarly found that teachers participating in their study perceived CLT as the method which abandoned the teaching of language structures. Using the same research paradigm, Liao and Zhao's [7] conducted their research to examine Chinese teachers' perspectives of CLT practice. The findings were similar to the studies of Sato and Kleinsasser [6] and Mareva and Mapako [5]. The teacher participants' interviews revealed that the teachers considered CLT as a language approach exclusively for teaching speaking and listening skills.

Those examples of misconception can be interpreted differently. Thomson [7] explained that the misconceptions about CLT emerged from the practical application in language textbooks and syllabi. This is because, in the early days of CLT, pioneering textbooks included no explicit teaching of grammar. This was similar to Krashen's [8] idea of language teaching. He supported the idea that grammar should be taught inductively (learners should be exposed to comprehensible input and discover the rules themselves) rather than deductively (the teaching of rules in the classroom as a subject). Hence, syllabi were purely developed based on the aims of what the learners would learn to do such as making phone call to book a hotel room, but they ignored or minimized the underlying knowledge of the language that learners would need to actually perform those tasks. He added that another frequent complaint from both experienced teachers as well as trainees was that CLT ignored the writing component of language, and learners were likely to talk more in a successful CLT classroom.

Even though some teachers attempted to integrate grammar in CLT classrooms, they expressed that they lack of strategies to do so. Liao and Zhao [7] unveiled that the teachers participating in their study lacked strategies that can be used to make CLT successful in class. Therefore, instead of integrating grammar with other communicative skills, they were likely to return to the traditional way of grammar teaching [7]. For example, Karavas-Doukas's [9] quantitative study reported that 14 Greek English language teachers agreed with CLT principles. However, when it came to the actual teaching practice, the teachers returned to the traditional way of grammar teaching. For

instance, most classes were teacher-fronted and explicitly focused on forms of language. In a similar vein, three years later, Sato and Kleinsasser [6] found that teacher participants, who claimed that they were using CLT, still adhered to traditional practices: teacher-fronted, repetition, translation, explicit grammar presentation, and practices from the textbooks in their classrooms. From the situations of grammar teaching in those studies, it is clear that the teaching methods for grammar in CLT classrooms tend to deviate considerably from the principles of the method.

### 3. Getting to Know CLT

CLT is described as a set of theories about the nature of language and of language learning for real-life communication [1]. The core of CLT is communicative competence which refers to the ability to use the target language (TL) effectively and appropriately. Savignon [10] helped clarify that the communicative competence was the ability of classroom language learners to make meaning in the target language in order to communicate with other speakers. This ability to communicate in real situations was distinct from their ability to recite dialogues or perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge [3, pp. 3].

In contrast to the ability of dialog reciting and performing grammatical test, the communicative competence consists of four components: (1) linguistic or grammatical competence; (2) sociolinguistic competence; (3) strategic competence; and (4) discourse competence [2]. Explained by Canale [2], linguistic or grammatical competence concerns learners' use of lexis, syntax, and structures. Sociolinguistic competence relates to the learner's 'appropriate use of language in

different situations and settings. Strategic competence is the use of strategies that can be used to make up for the inadequate abilities in other aspects of language competence. The last component, discourse competence, refers to the speakers' ability to form oral and written language appropriately and meaningfully.

Based on the communicative competence mentioned above, clearly, teaching grammar in CLT is not restricted to language and forms. Newby [11] explained that grammatical competence was actually made up of four types of knowledge. The first type of knowledge is knowledge of form (morphology, syntax) such as how to form words and structures correctly and how to order or pattern these forms within a sentence. The second knowledge is knowledge of meaning: notions (semantics). For example, what meaning options are available through a particular use of a grammatical form. This kind of knowledge helps language learners distinguish different meanings of the same form. Furthermore, using grammar not only entails knowing how to express meanings through forms but also knowing that grammar can be used to show a speaker's intention or wish. This is called knowledge of purpose: speech function (pragmatics). The last types of knowledge is knowledge of style: appropriacy (register/stylistics). This knowledge is also important because it tells the speaker whether one grammatical form might be more stylistically appropriate than another in a certain context where two or more forms are possible. Agreeing with Newby [11], Savignon [3] confirmed that grammatical competence goes beyond correct grammar usage in a sentence. Grammar competence is also related effective and appropriate language use for communication.

As grammatical competence is one of the four components of CLT methodology, it is

undeniable that grammar plays an essential role in communication. When learners have some grammatical knowledge, it helps learners acquire and learn a new language. Also, it helps learners develop other skills necessary for language learning, namely, writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills [12]. However, in order to communicate successfully and effectively, having only grammatical competence is not enough. Breen and Candlin [13] suggested that grammatical competence should come along with other three communicative competences. Later, Savignon [3] defined the integration of those competences as 'Language Art' which helped shape CLT curriculum which integrated nature of language learning.

#### 4. What Grammar Should Be Taught?

To integrate grammar teaching with other communicative knowledge, teachers should realize their learners' needs. All learners are different because of their ages, behaviors, and opportunities for language contact outside the classroom are varied. Nunan [14] further explained that appropriate grammatical choices can only be made with reference to the context and purpose of communication beyond their language classroom. Thus, grammar selected for learners should be linked to themes and topics that will be necessary for the particular learners [13]. For example, teachers can include past tense for describing one's past job duties in a job interview lesson. They might integrate the language rules used for describing plan, giving advice, or comparing interests for workplace situations [12]. When grammar relates to learners' communicative needs and experiences, the learners are more focused toward the subject being taught [15].

It is now the teacher's job to discover what learners' needs or what essential language skills are for learners. Breen and Candlin [13] proposed the way to identify several types of learners' expectations by asking the following questions. First, teachers can ask: how the learner defines his own language learning needs. Second, teachers can elicit what is likely to interest the learner both within the target repertoire and learning process. Third, teachers can seek what the learner's motivations are for the target repertoire [13, pp.94]. More than two decades later, Richard [16] highlighted the importance of needs analysis – the use of observation, surveys, interviews, – in order to determine the kinds of communication, learners would need to master in specific occupational or educational roles and the language features of particular settings. After finishing the process of discovery, teachers will find out that their learners have different needs and expectations in language learning.

Due to the learners' variety of needs, teaching grammar is considered to be a challenging task for the language teachers. The teachers should not only equip with knowledge of grammar but also strategies to analyze what grammar is necessary for their learners. Therefore, the teachers should understand natures of their learners, the contexts they live in, and their expectations from language learning. When the knowledge of grammar meets those learners' needs, it will eventually help enhance learners' interests in language learning.

## 5. Integrating Grammar into Activities in CLT classrooms

Designing activities integrating grammar with other communicative components that fits the needs of learners is not easy. Due to different language needs of the learners, there is no clear-cut criteria for designing and developing the best classroom activities for CLT classrooms. Different learners use different processes as the means towards their particular needs [13]. Therefore, it is noteworthy to provide teachers with three concepts of activities that can be adapted for grammar teaching CLT classrooms [3], [16], [17]: 1) information-gap tasks; 2) role-play activities; and 3) problem solving tasks, as a guideline and ideas to help teachers develop CLT classroom environment.

The first concept of activity involves information-gap tasks. The activity makes learners work in groups or pairs which helps promote communicative atmosphere. Learners have to share information in order to overcome each gap. They need to work cooperatively to exchange information and interact with their classmates [17]. According to language arts [3], 'scrambled passages' is one game that can help highlight language forms. Teacher gives slips of paper, each bearing a chunk of connected discourse from reading passage, dialogue, and so forth. Learners have to compare sentences or utterances and position themselves in a line to read off the reconstructed text. A typical classroom will accommodate three or four groups working, at once, on the different texts. 'Group amnesia' is another game that can be used to provide practice in the use of particular structures and vocabulary—for example, interrogative verb forms and high-frequency adjectives. What teachers have to do is to prepare cards with the names of famous persons on them, and then pin a card on the back of each player. Players move about the

room asking questions of classmates—for example, “Am I alive?” “Am I an American?” Questions may answer with only “Yes” or “No”. When players think they have discovered who they are, they go to the person directing the game to check their guess, a correct guess wins, and a wrong guess sends the player back to ask more questions [3, pp. 174-175].

Apart from information-gap tasks, a role-play activities are another type of activities that is often applied in CLT classroom. The purpose of role-plays is to provide learners with opportunity to prepare and practice communication in different contexts [1]. Savignon helped illustrate that role play constituted the component of language learning which provided learners with the tools they needed to act, interpret, express and negotiate meaning in a new language in real life [3, pp. 15]. To apply a role-play activity in the classrooms, teachers set some situations that require learners to use a particular language form and structure. For instance, learners may need to talk to colleagues, classmates or co-workers, versus to superiors, teachers, landlord, or employers [18]. This will help emphasize differences of language forms used with people in various levels.

Teachers can also teach grammar through problem solving tasks. Practical solving skills are a daily aspect of learners’ lives. Thus, problem solving tasks can help reinforce such skills when learners communicate. What teachers have to do is to design tasks that involve learners’ problem discussion by identifying issues and suggesting possible solutions. Teachers can make use of these tasks to teach grammar necessary for a particular situation. For example, learners are required to discuss people’s money problems or working out a teacher’s timetable on the basis of given class

timetables by using the modals “could” (for suggestions) and “should” (for advice) [16].

When employing specific tasks and activities in any classrooms, it is important to bear in mind that those activities will not generate the same learning results in different contexts. Also, not all the activities mentioned above will work best with every learner. This is because learners in several contexts have distinct preferences for the same tasks and activities. Also, learners have different learning styles. For instance, while some learners might prefer games and contests to be their most favorite activities in English classes, some might like singing and group discussions. Hence, to select or design any tasks and activities, teachers should think about learners’ differences in a variety of contexts and learn how to adapt and adjust those activities based on the natures of their learners.

## 6. Conclusion

The holistic view about the communicative language teaching or CLT is the teaching method that focuses on communication rather than discrete language skill. The core of CLT is communicative competence, which composes of four components including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence. Obviously, grammar is still important in CLT classrooms. Rather than ignoring grammar teaching in CLT classrooms, grammar should be taught by integrating to other skills based on learners’ communicative needs and their social contexts. In addition, teachers should not merely focus on forms but also focus on meaning and function of each form used in different occasions. This is because some learners who can use forms correctly

might not be able communicate effectively and fluently in reality. Thus, to reinforce learners' communicative abilities, teachers should learn and seek the ways to integrate grammar with other linguistic features through tasks and activities. However, teachers should be aware that the examples of communicative tasks and activities suggested might not display accomplished learning results in every context. This is teachers' job to work on how to adapt and adjust those tasks and activities to fit with learners' needs in their own contexts.

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