

# 2

## *The Background to CLT*

In planning a language course, decisions have to be made about the content of the course, including decisions about what vocabulary and grammar to teach at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels, and which skills and microskills to teach and in what sequence. Decisions about these issues belong to the field of **syllabus design** or **course design**. Decisions about how best to teach the contents of a syllabus belong to the field of **methodology**.

Language teaching has seen many changes in ideas about syllabus design and methodology in the last 50 years, and CLT prompted a rethinking of approaches to syllabus design and methodology. We may conveniently group trends in language teaching in the last 50 years into three phases:

**Phase 1:** traditional approaches (up to the late 1960s)

**Phase 2:** classic communicative language teaching (1970s to 1990s)

**Phase 3:** current communicative language teaching (late 1990s to the present)

Let us first consider the transition from traditional approaches to what we can refer to as classic communicative language teaching.

### **Phase 1: Traditional Approaches (up to the late 1960s)**

As we saw in Chapter 1, traditional approaches to language teaching gave priority to grammatical competence as the basis of language proficiency. They were based on the belief that grammar could be learned through direct instruction and through a methodology that made much use of repetitive practice and drilling. The approach to the teaching of grammar was a *deductive* one: students are presented with grammar rules and then given opportunities to practice using them, as opposed to an *inductive* approach in which students are given examples of sentences containing a grammar rule and asked to work out the rule for themselves. It was assumed that language learning meant building up a large repertoire of sentences and grammatical patterns and learning to produce these accurately and quickly in the appropriate situation. Once a basic command of the language was established through oral drilling and controlled practice, the four skills were introduced, usually in the sequence of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Techniques that were often employed included memorization of dialogs, question-and-answer practice, substitution drills, and various forms of guided speaking and writing practice. Great attention to accurate pronunciation and accurate mastery of grammar was stressed from the very beginning stages

of language learning, since it was assumed that if students made errors, these would quickly become a permanent part of the learner's speech.

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### Task 5

Do you think drills or other forms of repetitive practice should play any role in language teaching?

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Methodologies based on these assumptions include **Audiolingualism** (in North America) (also known as the **Aural-Oral Method**), and the **Structural-Situational Approach** in the United Kingdom (also known as **Situational Language Teaching**). Syllabuses during this period consisted of word lists and grammar lists, graded across levels.

In a typical audiolingual lesson, the following procedures would be observed:

1. Students first hear a model dialog (either read by the teacher or on tape) containing key structures that are the focus of the lesson. They repeat each line of the dialog, individually and in chorus. The teacher pays attention to pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. Correction of mistakes of pronunciation or grammar is direct and immediate. The dialog is memorized gradually, line by line. A line may be broken down into several phrases if necessary. The dialog is read aloud in chorus, one half saying one speaker's part and the other half responding. The students do not consult their book throughout this phase.
2. The dialog is adapted to the students' interest or situation, through changing certain key words or phrases. This is acted out by the students.
3. Certain key structures from the dialog are selected and used as the basis for pattern drills of different kinds. These are first practiced in chorus and then individually. Some grammatical explanation may be offered at this point, but this is kept to an absolute minimum.
4. The students may refer to their textbook, and follow-up reading, writing, or vocabulary activities based on the dialog may be introduced.
5. Follow-up activities may take place in the language laboratory, where further dialog and drill work is carried out.

(Richards and Rodgers 2001, 64–65)

In a typical lesson according to the situational approach, a three-phase sequence, known as the *P-P-P cycle*, was often employed: Presentation, Practice, Production.

**Presentation:** The new grammar structure is presented, often by means of a conversation or short text. The teacher explains the new structure and checks students' comprehension of it.

**Practice:** Students practice using the new structure in a controlled context, through drills or substitution exercises.

**Production:** Students practice using the new structure in different contexts, often using their own content or information, in order to develop fluency with the new pattern.

The P-P-P lesson structure has been widely used in language teaching materials and continues in modified form to be used today. Many speaking- or grammar-based lessons in contemporary materials, for example, begin with an introductory phase in which new teaching points are presented and illustrated in some way and where the focus is on comprehension and recognition. Examples of the new teaching point are given in different contexts. This is often followed by a second phase in which the students practice using the new teaching point in a controlled context using content often provided by the teacher. The third phase is a free practice period during which students try out the teaching point in a free context and in which real or simulated communication is the focus.

The P-P-P lesson format and the assumptions on which it is based have been strongly criticized in recent years, however. Skehan (1996, p.18), for example, comments:

The underlying theory for a P-P-P approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology.

Under the influence of CLT theory, grammar-based methodologies such as the P-P-P have given way to functional and skills-based teaching, and accuracy activities such as drill and grammar practice have been replaced by fluency activities based on interactive small-group work. This led to the emergence of a "fluency-first" pedagogy (Brumfit 1984) in which students' grammar needs are determined on the basis of performance on fluency tasks rather than predetermined by a grammatical syllabus. We can distinguish two phases in this development, which we will call *classic communicative language teaching* and *current communicative language teaching*.

## Phase 2: Classic Communicative Language Teaching (1970s to 1990s)

In the 1970s, a reaction to traditional language teaching approaches began and soon spread around the world as older methods such as Audiolingualism and Situational Language Teaching fell out of fashion. The centrality of grammar in language teaching and learning was questioned, since it was argued that language ability involved much more than grammatical competence. While grammatical competence was needed to produce grammatically correct sentences, attention shifted to the knowledge and skills needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative purposes such as making requests, giving advice, making suggestions, describing wishes and needs, and so on. What was needed in order to use language communicatively was *communicative competence*. This was a broader concept than that of grammatical competence, and as we saw in Chapter 1, included knowing what to say and how to say it appropriately based on the situation, the participants, and their roles and intentions. Traditional grammatical and vocabulary syllabuses and teaching methods did not include information of this kind. It was assumed that this kind of knowledge would be picked up informally.

The notion of communicative competence was developed within the discipline of linguistics (or more accurately, the subdiscipline of sociolinguistics) and appealed to many within the language teaching profession, who argued that communicative competence, and not simply grammatical competence, should be the goal of language teaching. The next question to be solved was, what would a syllabus that reflected the notion of communicative competence look like and what implications would it have for language teaching methodology? The result was communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching created a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement when it first appeared as a new approach to language teaching in the 1970s and 1980s, and language teachers and teaching institutions all around the world soon began to rethink their teaching, syllabuses, and classroom materials. In planning language courses within a communicative approach, grammar was no longer the starting point. New approaches to language teaching were needed.

Rather than simply specifying the grammar and vocabulary learners needed to master, it was argued that a syllabus should identify the following aspects of language use in order to be able to develop the learner's communicative competence:

1. As detailed a consideration as possible of the **purposes** for which the learner wishes to acquire the target language; for example, using English for business purposes, in the hotel industry, or for travel

2. Some idea of the **setting** in which they will want to use the target language; for example, in an office, on an airplane, or in a store
3. The socially defined **role** the learners will assume in the target language, as well as the role of their interlocutors; for example, as a traveler, as a salesperson talking to clients, or as a student in a school
4. The **communicative events** in which the learners will participate: everyday situations, vocational or professional situations, academic situations, and so on; for example, making telephone calls, engaging in casual conversation, or taking part in a meeting
5. The **language functions** involved in those events, or what the learner will be able to do with or through the language; for example, making introductions, giving explanations, or describing plans
6. The **notions** or concepts involved, or what the learner will need to be able to talk about; for example, leisure, finance, history, religion
7. The skills involved in the “knitting together” of discourse: **discourse and rhetorical skills**; for example, storytelling, giving an effective business presentation
8. The **variety** or varieties of the target language that will be needed, such as American, Australian, or British English, and the levels in the spoken and written language which the learners will need to reach
9. The **grammatical content** that will be needed
10. The **lexical content**, or vocabulary, that will be needed  
(van Ek and Alexander 1980)

This led to two important new directions in the 1970s and 1980s – proposals for a communicative syllabus, and the ESP movement.

## Proposals for a Communicative Syllabus

A traditional language syllabus usually specified the vocabulary students needed to learn and the grammatical items they should master, normally graded across levels from beginner to advanced. But what would a communicative syllabus look like?

Several new syllabus types were proposed by advocates of CLT. These included:

**A skills-based syllabus:** This focuses on the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and breaks each skill down into its component microskills. For example, the skill of listening might be further described in terms of the following microskills:

- Recognizing key words in conversations
- Recognizing the topic of a conversation
- Recognizing speakers' attitude toward a topic
- Recognizing time reference of an utterance
- Following speech at different rates of speed
- Identifying key information in a passage

Advocates of CLT however stressed an *integrated-skills* approach to the teaching of the skills. Since in real life the skills often occur together, they should also be linked in teaching, it was argued.

**A functional syllabus:** This is organized according to the functions the learner should be able to carry out in English, such as expressing likes and dislikes, offering and accepting apologies, introducing someone, and giving explanations. Communicative competence is viewed as mastery of functions needed for communication across a wide range of situations. Vocabulary and grammar are then chosen according to the functions being taught. A sequence of activities similar to the P-P-P lesson cycle is then used to present and practice the function. Functional syllabuses were often used as the basis for speaking and listening courses.

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### Task 6

What are some advantages and disadvantages of a skills-based syllabus and a functional syllabus?

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Other syllabus types were also proposed at this time. A *notional syllabus* was one based around the content and notions a learner would need to express, and a *task syllabus* specified the tasks and activities students should carry out in the classroom. (We will examine this in more detail in Chapter 5). It was soon realized, however, that a syllabus needs to identify all the relevant components of a language, and the first widely adopted communicative syllabus developed within the framework of classic CLT was termed *Threshold Level* (Van Ek and Alexander 1980). It described the level of proficiency learners needed to attain to cross the threshold and begin real communication. The threshold syllabus hence specifies topics, functions, notions, situations, as well as grammar and vocabulary.

## English for Specific Purposes

Advocates of CLT also recognized that many learners needed English in order to use it in specific occupational or educational settings. For them it would be more efficient to teach them the specific kinds of language and communicative skills needed for particular roles, (e.g., that of nurse, engineer, flight attendant, pilot, biologist, etc.) rather than just to concentrate on more general English. This led to the discipline of *needs analysis* – the use of observation, surveys, interviews, situation analysis, and analysis of language samples collected in different settings – in order to determine the kinds of communication learners would need to master if they were in specific occupational or educational roles and the language features of particular settings. The focus of needs analysis is to determine the specific characteristics of a language when it is used for specific rather than general purposes. Such differences might include:

- Differences in vocabulary choice
- Differences in grammar
- Differences in the kinds of texts commonly occurring
- Differences in functions
- Differences in the need for particular skills

ESP courses soon began to appear addressing the language needs of university students, nurses, engineers, restaurant staff, doctors, hotel staff, airline pilots, and so on.

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### Task 7

Imagine you were developing a course in English for tour guides. In order to carry out a needs analysis as part of the course preparation:

- Who would you contact?
  - What kinds of information would you seek to obtain from each contact group?
  - How would you collect information from them?
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## Implications for Methodology

As well as rethinking the nature of a syllabus, the new communicative approach to teaching prompted a rethinking of classroom teaching methodology. It was argued that learners learn a language through the process of communicating in it, and that communication that is meaningful to the learner provides a better opportunity for learning than through a grammar-based approach. The over-

arching principles of communicative language teaching methodology at this time can be summarized as follows:

- Make real communication the focus of language learning.
- Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.
- Be tolerant of learners' errors as they indicate that the learner is building up his or her communicative competence.
- Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.
- Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world.
- Let students induce or discover grammar rules.

In applying these principles in the classroom, new classroom techniques and activities were needed, and as we saw above, new roles for teachers and learners in the classroom. Instead of making use of activities that demanded accurate repetition and memorization of sentences and grammatical patterns, activities that required learners to negotiate meaning and to interact meaningfully were required. These activities form the focus of the next chapter.

