Communicative Competence: A Comparison of Two Approaches

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Abstract

This article is a comparison of the Natural Approach and Communicative Language Teaching. Using the Richards and Rodgers’ model for conceptualizing approaches and methods described in Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, 1986, Cambridge University Press, I compare and contrast these two approaches carefully at the level of approach, design and procedure. At the level of approach, I look at the theories of language and language learning integral to each. At the level of design, I focus on the instructional systems design elements identified by the above authors: specifically, the objectives, syllabus, activity types, learner and teacher roles, and the role of materials. At the level of procedures, I briefly discuss the techniques, practices and behaviors that support the design. In conclusion, I show that both NA and CLT are examples of communicative competence.
Communicative Competence: a Comparison of Two Approaches

In reviewing the literature on teaching English as a second or foreign language, the phrase “communicative competence” is everywhere. It’s hardly possible to pick up a journal, a newsletter or modern language textbook that doesn’t emphasize the communicative nature of language. In this article I look carefully at how two approaches, the Natural Approach (NA) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), incorporate this modern view of the nature of language and language learning into their design and implementation.

The basis for this comparison is Richards and Rodgers model for conceptualizing approaches and methods described in Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, 1986, Cambridge University Press. This model looks at three levels; approach, design and procedure.

Approach

According to this model, at the level of approach there are two components; the theory of language and the theory of language learning.

Richards and Rodgers (1986) describe three theoretical views of the theory of language: structural, functional and interactional. The structural view sees language as a system of phonological, grammatical and lexical elements for coding meaning. From the structuralist perspective, language learning is mastering these elements. This early view gave rise to such methods as Audiolingualism (ALM) and Total Physical Response (TPR).

The functional, or communicative, view sees language as a vehicle for expressing functional meaning, emphasizing semantics and communication over the grammatical characteristics of language while not excluding that aspect. From the functionalist perspective, language learning is mastering communicative functions and meaning. This view gave rise to the Functional-Notional Syllabus and to the subjects of this article, NA and CLT.
The interactional view sees language as the means of creating and maintaining social relations. From the interactionalist perspective, language learning is achieving competence in initiating and maintaining conversations. This view gave rise to idea of language as a social process characteristic of Community Language Learning (CLL)

* A *theory of language learning* attempts to describe the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in language learning and the conditions required for those processes to take place. The learning processes include habit formation, induction, inferencing and generalization. Learning conditions refer to the human and physical context in which language is learned. Some theories are oriented more toward processes and others more toward conditions, while still others encompass both processes and conditions. Counseling-Learning and Silent Way, for example, are condition oriented while Total Physical Response is both process and condition oriented.

Richards and Rodgers define approach as a theory about the nature of language and language learning that serves as the source of practices and principles in language teaching. The literature acknowledges that NA and CLT provide little information about the nature of language. Still, both share a functional, or communicative, view of language. Both see language as communicative with an important but not central structural component and see successful communication of messages or function as the primary objective. Although they may lack a specific theory of language, a requirement for definition as an approach, their common views on the purpose of language and language learning permit the use of the approach label and make these “approaches” at least complementary.

The following table compares characteristics of NA and CLT at the level of approach.

**The Nature of Language**

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<tr>
<th>The Natural Approach</th>
<th>Communicative Language Teaching</th>
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<td>Functional with a structural component</td>
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<th>similar to ALM.</th>
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<td>Communication is the primary purpose of language so language is viewed as primarily messages and meaning. Little attention is paid to theories of language learning. Structures and grammar are mastered in stages but are not considered the central component of language. Language is lexical so vocabulary is stressed.</td>
<td>Language is viewed as the ability to perform different kinds of functions. While many “theories” of CLT exist, all refer in some way to communicative competence as the goal of language teaching.</td>
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The Nature of Language Learning

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| NA is supported by Krashen’s second language acquisition theory (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) called the Monitor Model. This model describes the processes as acquisition and learning and the necessary conditions as comprehensible input in a low anxiety setting. This theory relies on five hypotheses:  
- Acquisition/learning hypothesis: acquisition is natural and unconscious (childlike) and learning is rules based and conscious  
- Monitor hypothesis: conscious learning’s only function is to correct acquired language.  
- Natural order hypothesis: grammatical structures are acquired in a natural order.  
- Input hypothesis: challenging input produces fluency over time.  
- Affective filter hypothesis: anxiety prevents acquisition so lowering affective filters results in better acquisition. | CLT is described by no specific theory of language learning, but Richards and Rodgers suggest three underlying principles:  
- Communicative principle: real communication activities promote learning.  
- Task principle: meaningful task activities promote learning.  
- Meaningfulness principle: meaningful and authentic language use activities engage learners, thus promote learning. These principles relate to conditions for language learning, but the implied process is acquisition rather than learning as defined by Krashen. |

Design

According to the Richards and Rodgers model, in order to move from the approach level to the level of procedure, an instructional system must be designed. The instructional system
elements are objectives, the syllabus, activity types, learner and teacher roles and, finally, the role of instructional materials.

*Objectives* state the hoped for outcomes of a method. For example, a focus may be on developing listening and speaking skills, rather than written language skills. Maybe the ability to express meaning is much more emphasized than accurate grammar or pronunciation. In some methods, process is more important than knowledge. Is a method more concerned with affecting behavior or more concerned with learner acquisition of vocabulary and structure?

To paraphrase Richards and Rodgers, NA is for beginners with the goal of moving learners to the intermediate stage, where they should be able to function adequately in the target situation. As a set of general principles, NA is applicable to a wide variety of situations so specific objectives depend on learner needs and their skill levels. Course expectations are communicated at the beginning.

For CLT, general objectives exist at several levels; for example at the levels of content, linguistics, affectivity and feedback. Emphasis is on creating specific objectives based on the specific needs of the learners. These objectives are characteristic of a communicative approach. References in CLT to language as expression, as an object of learning, and as a vehicle for expressing values mirror the primary purposes of language that dominate descriptions of NA. Thus, at the level of objectives, these two approaches continue to be complementary.

The *syllabus* contains the content of a course or method, if a syllabus exists at all. It may contain only language content, only subject content, or both, perhaps separately. For product centered methods, the syllabus contains the grammatical and structural items to be covered and the vocabulary to be acquired. In a notional-functional syllabus, the communication content such
as functions, topics, grammar and vocabulary are shown. However, process centered methods, with much less emphasis on content, may have no language content syllabus at all.

In design, the NA syllabus is a semantic, or notional, one that includes a series of topics of interest to the students through which comprehensible input is provided in conjunction with tasks, games and other classroom activities (Krashen, 1985). His earlier writings with Terrell in 1983 suggest the possibility of two syllabuses; a communicative, or acquisition, based one and a grammar, or learning, based one.

The acquisition syllabus recognizes three stages of the learner. Personal identification is where the learners acquire the ability to communicate personal information about themselves, their family and interests, and so on. These are likely to be the first kinds of information exchanged in real situations. Next is the experience stage where the learner focus is on communicating in conversation about their life experiences. These are common topics when traveling or living in another country. The opinions stage is where learners express their own views. At this level, learners gain the confidence and competence to express these political, social, family, religious and other personal viewpoints.

The grammar, or learning, syllabus is addressed to the monitor function or conscious learning. Its stands to reason then that it has little applicability at the beginning stage of acquisition, when little acquisition has occurred that can be monitored. This effectively postpones any learning activity until learners have acquired the skills to produce at least simple, short sentences. More advanced learners capable of understanding the grammar presentation may profit from learning so a grammatical syllabus is useful. The result may be more refined and grammatically correct language production.
CLT syllabus discussions are characterized by a lack of agreement on an ideal design. The common element of proposed syllabuses is the desire to identify and list communicative tasks to be completed at certain levels of competency. The European threshold level approach includes language items needed to achieve a reasonable level of proficiency. Some researchers list as many as eight types of communicative syllabuses while others suggest the only appropriate syllabus is a procedural one listing task types and an order of task complexity.

In recent literature (Savignon, 1997) the CLT syllabus is described more typically as being of the notional-functional variety that organizes language content by functional categories. Having first determined the situations in which learners will use the language, the teacher identifies the appropriate functions. Then the notions, or concepts, related to those functions are considered. Finally, the structures to be taught are based on grammar and vocabulary useful to the performance of those functions.

Savignon gives an example. “A communicative function of identifying or reporting (including describing and narrating) may be related to the general spatial notion of location. For English this notion leads to identification of lexical items such as here, there, inside, outside, behind, in, on, at, near and so forth.”

Functions to be learned are sequenced in the syllabus on the basis of the learners’ needs.

It is clear then that neither NA nor CLT is organized around grammatical structures. Rather, grammar is taught as the need arises in communicative use. In NA, that can only happen after sufficient acquisition takes place. In CLT, it occurs as the need arises in the production of functional or situational language. Here again, the complementary relationship between NA and CLT continues.
Methodological differences at the approach level predictably result in different choices of activities in the classroom. Structural methods require activities that focus on grammar and structure. Methods that focus on the cognitive processes for language acquisition might focus on inference and induction activities. No matter which it is, the activity types selected and how they are used must complement the objectives of the method.

Activities in the NA classroom focus on comprehensible input. Real objects, such as classroom realia and pictures may be the basis for acquisition lessons. Learners are not encouraged to speak until they are ready. At that point, teachers, moving slowly, progress from simple to more complex speech, using only well rehearsed vocabulary.

NA adapts techniques from other methods so that the NA classroom displays an eclectic variety of activities. The focus of these techniques remains the providing of comprehensible input in an anxiety free setting. NA classrooms typically move from receptive skills to productive skills, beginning with TPR techniques such as commands and acting out, followed by question-and-answer activities involving identification of characteristics of fellow students, and visuals used to introduce new vocabulary. There is intensive use of repetition and paraphrase.

The next phase requires simple production and response to open-ended questions and dialogues, yes-no questions and so forth until learners achieve the third stage. This stage is characterized by situational dialogues and problem-solving requiring interaction in the classroom, resulting in increased overall proficiency.

Activities in the CLT classroom focus on the communicative process: negotiating meaning, sending and receiving messages and expressing values. They frequently utilize techniques of information gaps and information gathering. Distinction can be seen in activities that support
functional communication compared to social interaction, where dialogues and role-plays may dominate.

And why are dialogue and role-play so important? D. A. Wilkins (1976) suggests it is for the following reason. “It will ensure that all utterances are properly contextualized and it will require the learners to attempt to exhibit the very language behaviour that we have defined as the principal objective of language learning.”

Savignon organizes learning activities into thematic clusters starting with Language Arts, or the rules of usage, through Beyond the Classroom, which prepares learners for the real world. Within these thematic clusters a wide range of activity options are exercised. These include games (e.g. memory tests, vocabulary tic-tac-toe), journals, storytelling, simulations, role-playing and activities outside of the classroom. The list is extensive.

The learner’s role under any method is determined in large measure by the view of the learner’s responsibility for the learning process. Is the learner viewed as a sponge, whose function is to soak up the elements of language until one language is produced spontaneously? Or is the learner’s role to contribute to the process by planning his own learning, bringing to the classroom his own needs, knowledge and experiences and interacting with other learners?

NA learners are viewed as processors. Slightly challenging comprehensible input requires the learner to actively consider it in conjunction with awareness of the context and other information already in the learner’s possession. In the beginning stages, learners may participate physically but silently. When ready to speak, learners respond briefly to simple questions. Ultimately, the learner participates in higher-level activities like role-play, expressing opinions and problem solving.
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CLT learners are seen as more outwardly focused from the beginning. They are viewed as negotiators who take some responsibility for their own learning. They are contributors to the learning process. Language production is encouraged from the start, even if in the primary language.

The teacher’s role, like the learner’s role, is linked to the principles established at the approach level. During their own education and training, teachers learn they have many roles: teacher, coach, mentor, facilitator, counselor, monitor and numerous others. Which of these roles, or combination of these roles, they take on varies with the method employed. It can be said with certainty that the teacher’s role(s) must complement the objectives of the instructional system and the learning theory established at the approach level. To paraphrase Richards and Rodgers, success depends on the teacher providing the content or creating the conditions for successful language learning.

In this area, NA is crystal clear. The teacher has three primary roles. First, provide comprehensible input in the target language. Second, create a classroom environment where the anxiety level is as low as possible. Finally, based on experience and the learner’s needs, create a mélange of mixed context and content activities for varying group sizes. As mentioned earlier, the teacher must communicate reasonable classroom objectives and expectations early on in the course and subsequent tasks.

As with nearly every other aspect of CLT, the teacher’s role is broadly defined, thanks to the various views of CLT. Titles such as facilitator, guide, organizer, needs analyst and counselor are all used to describe the teacher’s function. But the common element again is communication so the first and foremost role of the teacher is to promote and manage the communicative processes in the classroom and to prepare the learners for authentic real world interaction.
The function of instructional materials is to support the objectives of the method. If an instructional system specifies oral language development, for example, the materials should provide for a focus on that skill development. If a structural view of language has defined the design, materials should focus on intense grammatical and structural activities. It is evident that the role of instructional materials is a function of methodology. As evidence, contrast the importance of the textbook in Situational Language Teaching to the central role of tapes, audiovisuals, and even a language laboratory, in ALM.

Materials used in the NA classroom are realia rather than textbooks. Since their purpose is to add to the body of comprehensible input, they must be of the real world and foster real language. Specifically, maps, schedules, pictures, advertisements and games are just a few of the materials appropriate. The teacher must supply these and so the title Collector of Realia may be added to the list of NA teacher roles.

CLT classroom materials are defined by the primary role of promoting communicative language use. Richards and Rodgers neatly categorize materials into three types. First are text-based, some of which are nearly structural with a functional bias and some that are based solely on functions. Second are task-based; that is materials developed especially for CLT such as games, activity cards, exercise handbooks and others. Finally realia, authentic materials from life, whether language based or from visual sources, are described.

**Procedures**

The last level in the Richards and Rodgers model is procedure. It describes the techniques, practices and behaviors that support the design and therefore the method employed to teach the language. It is what goes on in the classroom; the teaching activities, the devices used to practice the language, and the feedback process. It is also the level at which classrooms become unique
because, at this level, the teacher’s experience and preferences, the learner’s needs and desires, and the social, physical and educational environment all impact on the learning process.

As discussed under activities, NA adapts techniques and procedures from many methods for its own purposes. The command sequences of TPR activities for example can be used to provide input while allowing learners to remain virtually silent or at least to respond in the most minimal way. Richards and Rodgers show the use of TPR commands, mime, gestures, visual aids and repetition as comprehensible and meaningful activities in an NA classroom.

CLT, too, has such a broad range of classroom activities available based on communicative principles that there is no typical classroom procedure. Discussing procedures then becomes nearly impossible in any concise way. The activities simply support the goals of CLT by the use of authentic materials presented at the level of learner needs to achieve meaningful communication.

Conclusion

While we find differences in NA and CLT at the level of approach, design and procedure, we also find many similarities. In the end, the differences are far less significant than the similarities. The essential differences are the point at which language production starts and the stage at which structural instruction begins. The primary focus of both is communicative competence, the use of language that is appropriate to the situation in all aspects.

There is a danger in making comparisons such as this, as well as opportunity. The danger is in thinking that methodology requires an all-or-nothing approach to teaching a second language; that using a particular approach means using it to the exclusion of all others.

I view comparing approaches as an opportunity, an opportunity to add to our knowledge of how language is learned so we can use the best practices from each theory and methodology. We
should displace either-or thinking with an in-addition-to attitude in our efforts to achieve what
Nunan (1999) calls our ultimate goal, “to enable the learner to communicate with others in the
world beyond the classroom.”
References


