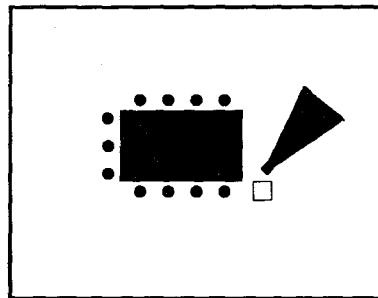


Paying lip-service to CLT

Scott Thornbury, International House,
Barcelona



The failure of many self-styled ‘communicative’ teachers to engage their learners in truly communicative language use may have its roots in the messages – either explicit or implicit – they received in their initial training. Scott Thornbury examines some of those messages and suggests ways in which language use, as opposed to usage, could be prioritised in training.

Two stories

1. I was observing teaching practice on a pre-service course where the students were a mixed bag of nationalities, including Japanese and Armenians. The teacher had set an intermediate class a text on earthquakes. At no point in the lesson, either before they read the text or afterwards, did the teacher ask the students if any of them had experienced an earthquake, or whether it worried them that the city in which the class was taking place happened to be on a major fault line.
2. In another class of beginners, the trainee teacher was teaching comparative adjectives. He used a board full of stick figures to teach ‘taller than...’ and ‘older than...’. In an hour’s lesson the students were never invited to use this language to talk about themselves – and this despite the fact that one of the students was a good half head taller than anyone else in the class!

These experiences are by no means rare – nor perhaps surprising, given the pressure trainees are often under to ‘perform’(more on this later). What was particularly surprising was the fact that, during feedback on these lessons, in neither case did the tutors pick up on the failure of the trainee teachers to exploit opportunities for real language use. It did not seem to be high in their list of priorities, despite frequent

Paying lip-service to CLT

references during input sessions to the 'communicative' nature of the methodology being promoted.

A discrepancy

The failure of self-styled 'communicative' teachers to provide their learners with opportunities for authentic language use is well documented. Nunan, for example, noted a basic discrepancy between what teachers say they do, and what they in fact do:

There is growing evidence that, in communicative classes, interactions may, in fact, not be very communicative. (Nunan 1987:144)

Legutke and Thomas (1991) are less circumspect:

In spite of trendy jargon in textbooks and teacher's manuals, very little is actually communicated in the L2 classroom. The way it is structured does not seem to stimulate the wish of learners to say something, nor does it tap what they might have to say. ...Learners do not find room to speak as themselves, to use language in communicative encounters, to create text, to stimulate responses from fellow learners, or to find solutions to relevant problems. (Legutke and Thomas 1991:8-9)

The condition is by no means restricted to trainee or novice teachers: the evidence from the observation of teachers on in-service courses suggests that the kind of teaching Legutke and Thomas describe is persistent and widespread. There have been few attempts, however, to identify a cause (or causes). I want to argue that an area worth investigating might be the messages that teachers receive – either implicitly or explicitly – during their initial training. As both a tutor and an assessor under the RSA/Cambridge CTEFLA scheme, I have a growing suspicion that the methodology that is generally being promoted by the scheme is fundamentally at odds with the view of learning that supposedly underpins it. Lip-service is being paid to CLT: the practice is somewhere else entirely.

Grammar rules, OK?

The following comment appeared in a trainee's diary at the outset of a pre-service course at our centre in Spain. It was written in response to the question 'What are your expectations of this course?'

Paying lip-service to CLT

At present I anticipate that the course will challenge one's stamina and commitment due to the intensity and concentration on grammar.

Where did the trainee get the idea that there would be such a heavy emphasis on grammar? Partly, no doubt, from the folk wisdom that the teaching of a language involves little more than imparting the rules of its grammar. But if so, this was an expectation reinforced at every stage of the process leading up to and including the first day of the course.

For example, the application form for the course is sent out along with an 'Applicant Test'. This consists largely of questions that relate to language systems such as:

I. Which is the 'odd one out' in each group, and why?

- a. The plane was hi-jacked by a woman.
 - i. The tourists were attacked by a gang.
 - ii. The soldier was hit by a bullet.
 - iii. The trains collided by a river.
 - iv. Three hundred people were killed by the earthquake.

(...)

II. Can you think of any exceptions to the following 'rules'?

- a. 'The' is not used with names of people.
- b. The past form of the verb is used to describe finished events or states.

(...)

III. Identify any incorrect sentences in this list, explain the error and supply the corrected version:

- a. What did you say was your name?
- b. I've been to China last year.

(...)

Paying lip-service to CLT

Assuming an applicant is accepted for interview, it is these same questions that become an important focus of the interview.

Interviewees who are accepted on to the course are then given a 'Pre-Course Task'. Again, the bulk of this task is concerned with questions of language (as opposed to either learning or teaching). And when, on Day One of the course, the timetable is handed out, regular grammar (or 'Language Analysis') sessions, on such topics as 'The Present Simple', 'The Futures', and 'Modals', form an important core of the course¹. In addition, some centres, at the outset, provide their trainees with a list of the criteria according to which their success on the course will be judged. One centre had prioritised the following: '...the ability to analyze accurately and present clearly the meaning, form and use of grammar structures'.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that trainees expect 'intensity and concentration on grammar.' The agenda of the course, on the evidence of all the documentation they receive in advance, seems to be entirely grammar-driven.

A hidden agenda

Subsequent documentation often serves to confirm this initial impression. For example, one centre invites trainees to assess themselves in advance of a mid-course tutorial, and asks them, among other things, to consider their 'ability to analyze language items' and their 'use of basic drilling and correction techniques'. There is no mention of 'provision of opportunities for authentic use', for example. At another centre the checklist of items to be evaluated in the tutorial starts with:

Highlighting	form
	structure
	stress
	sounds
	intonation
Concept checking	
Controlled practice/Accuracy	
Practice	eg drilling
etc	

The only mention of 'communication' comes as a sub-heading under 'Productive Skills' - 'communicative tasks'. Again, no mention is made of real language use. And guidelines for teaching practice - so-called 'TP points' - seldom include reference to authentic use either. On the contrary, a large proportion of practicum

Paying lip-service to CLT

time is devoted to the presentation and practice of discrete linguistic items, where students are treated as if they had nothing more to contribute to the lesson than to answer questions about grammar.

At most, trainees might be invited to 'personalise' the targeted grammatical item once presented and practised. It is hardly surprising that this 'personalisation' stage is often squeezed into the last few minutes of the class, if it is included at all.

The overriding message that comes through again and again is that the language teacher's main job is not so much to create conditions for authentic language *use*, but to teach specific linguistic *forms*, forms that are always pre-selected, often only minimally contextualised, and rarely personalised. The net effect in the teaching practice classes is that students seldom produce much language beyond the word or phrase level; they are rarely engaged with the topics or the material; and, at higher levels, they are often severely underchallenged.

Performance and risk

Allowance should be made, of course, to the peculiar conditions under which teaching practice takes place. The performance nature of the practicum has a distorting effect on even the best intentions. And it is well documented that novice teachers are so fixated on their own behaviours that they ignore the needs of their students:

Their inadequate knowledge of classroom procedures ... appears to prevent novice teachers from focusing on what pupils are learning from academic tasks. Instead, working memory is devoted to monitoring their own behaviour as they attempt to imitate or invent workable procedures. (Kagan 1992:145)

This is a tendency that tutors themselves are in danger of reinforcing, through a pre- and post-lesson focus on procedures – '*You did this... you didn't do that ... you could do this ...*' – at the expense of what it is that the *students* were doing or saying (or not saying). Often, in fact, trainees are very good at engaging with their learners in the earlier part of the course, but the pressure on 'product-type' lessons – the well-crafted, technically fluent lesson – and the final long lessons in particular, diverts the attention of everyone, tutors and trainees alike, away from the 'processes' of teaching and learning.

And, in defence of the two trainees whose lessons I described at the start of this

Paying lip-service to CLT

paper, personalising material always runs the risk of unsettling learners, of stirring latent anxieties. Both trainees, when questioned, felt that both to open a discussion about earthquakes and to ask students to make comparisons about each other was potentially threatening. In response, all I can say is that all human communication is potentially threatening; we need to be sensitive to this fact, and authentic in our response to learner discomfort; but if we shy away from any potentially risky interaction, then the purposes for which language is designed will never be properly tapped.

Nevertheless, lack of experience or fear of discomforting learners does not explain the hidden grammar agenda that surfaces in the pre-course documentation, in the course program, and in assessment criteria of many current pre-service courses. In fact, this agenda is not always so covert. Many trainers, despite their lip-service to a communicative approach, seem to be explicitly endorsing a 'present and drill'-type methodology, suggesting that there is, indeed, a much-touted 'return of grammar to the centre stage of language teaching and learning'. (Tonkyn 1994:12)

A fallacy

I have argued elsewhere (Thornbury 1995) that this grammar revival is based on a misguided view of how languages are learned: a condition that Skehan (1994:181) calls the 'linguistic fallacy': 'that there is a straightforward relationship between how grammatical systems are described, and how they should be used practically'. Or, for that matter, how they should be taught. Even some academic grammarians have come round to the view that a wide gulf may separate the describable and the teachable:

We may need to accept that information about the different meanings certain grammatical items can carry may be of more interest and use to grammarians than it is to learners... It is our view that a fundamental implication of all current language acquisition research is that teachers would be wise to remain sceptical of the long-term effects of any kind of formal instruction on the grammatical development of their learners. (Beaumont and Gallaway 1994:172-3)

This scepticism does not seem to be shared by a number of training centres, however. This would not in itself be worthy of comment if the centres concerned did not openly subscribe to a 'communicative' methodology. Yet, wherever there is an explicit statement of approach, it is invariably in communicative terms, albeit qualified, quite often, as 'eclectic' or 'balanced'.

Paying lip-service to CLT

Small-c communication

What is meant by this use of the term 'communicative'? I suspect that many centres simply mean by this that students are encouraged to interact, that pair and group work are valued, and that certain techniques, such as 'information gap' activities, are promoted. This I would call small-c communication – communication as a medium, irrespective of message. It is on a par with small-s student-centredness, which usually means nothing more than that students are encouraged to talk, and that the teacher should not.

Both communicativeness and student-centredness, defined in these weak terms, are compatible with a grammar-driven presentation-practice-production methodology. The communicativeness and the student-centredness come into operation as a way of structuring practice and production activities. But a grammar-driven PPP methodology is not CLT.

Meaning vs form-driven teaching

CLT is predicated on the belief that 'the importance of structure is not denied but it is thought that it is the need to express meanings that drives language development forward' (Skehan 1993:17). In other words, CLT is not grammar-driven – it is meaning-driven. It is fundamentally at odds with the ruling PPP paradigm, predicated as it is on a syllabus of *forms* which are first presented to learners before they are encouraged to enlist them to make meanings. As Willis (1990) has convincingly shown, there is a basic contradiction in a methodology that, on one hand, is organised around a syllabus of pre-selected discrete grammatical items, and, on the other, purports to be driven by the meanings the learners wish to express. Sooner or later, these two agendas are going to part company. It is simply inconsistent to say to learners, on the one hand, 'Say whatever you mean' and, on the other hand, 'Use the third conditional.'

Nevertheless, proponents of a traditional, form-focused, presentation methodology have taken heart, recently, in a re-appraisal of the role of grammar, partly in the light of fossilisation studies (eg Higgs and Clifford 1982). Researchers have concluded that 'there seems to be a positive effect (ie higher accuracy) for an increased focus on form in the communicative classroom in general' (Williams 1995:15). Hence, the claim that 'grammar is back' (Tonkyn *op cit*). What is often overlooked, however, is that those who are arguing for a focus on form are not arguing for a form-driven pedagogy – a focus on *forms* (Long and Crookes 1992). The form focus is not the starting point of instruction as in the PPP paradigm: it is

Paying lip-service to CLT

provided in *response to* the learner's attempt to make meanings. That is, it is a reactive focus, not a proactive one. It is most likely to be effective, according to studies undertaken mostly on Canadian immersion programs, '...at the moment when learners *know* what they want to say, indeed are trying to say something and the means to say it more correctly is offered to them' (Lightbown 1992:192, emphasis in original). Williams (1995:13) adds: '...it is vital to underscore that none of the studies ... points to a return to syllabi or methods that use isolated linguistic forms as an organizing principle'.

But this is exactly what seems to be happening, judging by the evidence of the pre-service training courses I have been describing. The linguistic tail is wagging the communicative dog.

I suspect, in fact, that, for many experienced teachers, and even some teacher trainers, there never was a capital-c Communicative approach. Nurtured in the late-audiolingual years, they adapted to the communicative revolution and its push towards a greater role for fluency, simply by extending the repertoire of 'production' activities to include jigsaw-listenings, 'info gaps', and so on, and by adopting courses whose grammatical syllabuses were thinly disguised behind functional labels. The PPP model was never actually interred. The first signs of a crack in the theoretical edifice supporting CLT, such as Swan's (1990) critique, were widely trumpeted, while the extraordinary success of the *Headway* series (Soars and Soars 1986 etc), overtly grammatical in its organisation, suggests that nothing, at heart, had changed. And now the revival of interest in a focus on form seems to have vindicated these closet practices.

Restoring the balance

Nothing is going to change ingrained practices overnight. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest some possible strategies for pre-service training that might each go some way towards restoring the balance from an obsessive concern with grammar ('teaching language') to, at least, some acknowledgement of the principles underlying true CLT ('language learning'). All these suggestions, I believe, are compatible with existing pre-service training models, although some will require greater adjustments to course design than others. Accordingly, I have ordered them in terms of the increasing degree of likely change they might entail:

1. A greater emphasis should be placed on the fourth P - personalisation - within the PPP paradigm. For example, an input session could be devoted to this area alone; and coursebook activities could be critiqued with a view

Paying lip-service to CLT

to the opportunities for personalisation that they offer. It should be made clear that personalisation is not an optional extra tagged on to the model, but is the component without which the other components are meaningless – literally.

2. The enrolment procedures and course documentation should be reviewed to ensure that the agenda conveyed to candidates is not one that prioritises language over learning. At the interview stage, for example, apart from questions about grammar, candidates could be asked about previous learning and teaching experiences: 'When did you last teach somebody something? How did you go about it?' Success criteria should be drafted to ensure that 'the provision of classroom opportunities for authentic use' is foregrounded.
3. The notions of 'student-centredness' and 'communicativeness' should be expanded to mean not simply that students participate and interact. Student-centredness should mean that the lesson content should be, where possible, student initiated and student driven. Communicativeness should be defined qualitatively – for example, as Puchta and Schratz (1993:3) define it: 'If the participants are being both frank and considerate, independent yet cooperative, and are speaking willingly and comprehensibly to particular listeners about things that matter to them both, then the quality of communication is high'. The terms STT (student-talking-time) and TTT (teacher-talking-time), traditionally used to measure the degree of 'student-centredness' should be scrapped, as they create a false distinction. Teacher talk is as valuable as student talk, if it provides learners with authentic input.
4. A tendency to want to increase the 'language' component of pre-service courses, at the possible expense of 'learning' components, should be resisted at all costs. Contrary to appeals (often by academics) that the study of language should be a prime focus of training (for example, 'If CLT is to become more 'communicative' it must be supported by more explicit linguistic awareness'[Burns 1990:36]), trainers need to be reminded that 'theories of grammar, though highly important to language pedagogy for other reasons, are not theories of language acquisition' (Rutherford 1987: 17). This applies as much to a functional grammar as to any other grammar. If CLT is to become more communicative it must be supported by an understanding of how language is learned, not described. Rather than the traditional, product-oriented, training syllabus of discrete language items ('Perfect aspect', 'Modals', 'Narrative tenses' and so on), the language component should perhaps be designed in process terms, for example:

Paying lip-service to CLT

'Lesson planning: anticipating problems'; 'Using reference sources'; 'Investigating language transfer' (Kerr 1994). In other words, language awareness should be viewed as 'awareness of when linguistic knowledge is what is needed, and the ability to locate, interpret and apply that knowledge. In this sense, linguistics in the content of TEFL training should be regarded *less as a content area than as a skill area.*' (Edge 1988, emphasis added).

5. The program could be re-designed so as to position fluency-type activities (or authentic use activities [Scrivener 1995]) sooner in the course, and to postpone the introduction of presentation techniques, on the assumption that (a) this may serve to attach greater importance to authentic use; and (b) presentation techniques, involving as they do a minimal degree of language analysis skill, are relatively late acquired.
6. An alternative model to the accuracy → fluency model (i.e. the PPP model, or the 'get-it-right-at-the-start' model [Lightbown and Spada 1993]) should be offered. An obvious candidate would be a fluency → accuracy model (or 'get-it-right-at-the-end'[Lightbown and Spada *op cit*]). Both models could be evaluated in terms of the principles they embody and the problems and challenges they present. Trainees should be encouraged to try both approaches and assess their effectiveness, particularly in terms of the authentic use opportunities they provide. One example of a fluency → accuracy model is the task-based approach². Another is the methodology of Community Language Learning. A third is simply to provide learners opportunities for talk and to give immediate feedback on their errors (see Thornbury 1995).

None of the above suggestions, even if implemented, will have any real effect if teacher trainers are not committed to a view of language learning that assigns a central role to the learner's meanings – a commitment to what Candlin (1994) has called 'empowering the learners to make meanings for themselves'. Short of such a commitment, earthquakes will happen only in the world of the students' coursebooks. The earth will not move for them.

Notes

1. Kerr (1994:4) reports, having surveyed 30 CTEFLA courses, that 'the loosely-used term 'LA' boils down, in practice, to the analysis of the verb phrase to the context of a P-P-P lesson'.

Paying lip-service to CLT

2. 'A presentation methodology is based on the belief that out of accuracy comes fluency. A task-based methodology is based on the belief that out of accuracy comes fluency. A task-based methodology is based on the belief that out of fluency comes accuracy, and that learning is prompted and refined by the need to communicate.' (Willis 1990:128)

References

- Beaumont M and Gallaway C 1994 'Articles of faith: The acquisition, learning and teaching of *a* and *the*' in Bygate et al (eds) 160-174
- Burns A 1990 'Focus on the language in the communicative classroom' in Brindley G (ed) *The Second Language Curriculum in Action* Sydney: NCELTR 36-58
- Bygate MA, Tonkyn and E Williams 1994 *Grammar and the Language Teacher* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall
- Candlin C 1994 'Task-based teaching: cognition, communication and cooperation'. (Paper given at APAC ELT Conference Barcelona)
- Edge J 1988 'Applying linguistics in English language teacher training for speakers of other languages' in *English Language Teaching Journal* 42:1 9-13
- Higgs T and Clifford R 1982 'The push towards communication' in Higgs T (Ed) *Curriculum, Competence and the Foreign Language Teacher* Skokie III National Textbook Co
- Kagan D 1992 'Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers' in *Review of Educational Research* 62:2 129-169
- Kerr P 1994 'Language awareness in native-speaker teacher training courses' in *The Newsletter of the Special Interest Group for Teacher Trainers of LATEFL* No 11 3-5
- Legutke M and H Thomas 1991 *Process and Experience in the Language Classroom* Harlow: Longman
- Lightbown P 1992 'Getting quality input in the second/foreign language classroom' in Kramsch & McConnell (eds) *Text and context: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on language study* Lexington MA: D C Heath 187-197

Paying lip-service to CLT

Lightbown P and N Spada 1993 *How languages are learned* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Long M H and Crookes G 1992 'Three approaches to task-based syllabus design' in *TESOL Quarterly* 26:1 27-56

Nunan D 1987 'Communicative language teaching: making it work' in *English Language Teaching Journal* 41/2 136-145

Puchta H and M Schratz 1993 *Teaching Teenagers* Harlow: Longman

Rutherford W E 1987 *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching* Harlow: Longman

Scrivener J 1995 *Learning Teaching* Oxford: Heinemann ELT

Skehan P 1993 'A framework for the implementation of task-based learning' in *LATEFL Annual Conference Report* 17-25 Whitstable Kent: LATEFL

Skehan P 1994 'Second language acquisition strategies, interlanguage development and task-based learning' in Bygate et al (eds) 175-199

Soars J and Soars L 1986 *Headway Intermediate* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Swan M 1990 'A critical look at the communicative approach' in Rossner and Bolitho (eds) *Currents of Change in English Language Teaching* Oxford: Oxford University Press 73-98

Tonkyn A 1994 'Introduction: grammar and the language teacher' in Bygate et al (eds) 1-14

Thornbury S 1995 'Not waving but drowning: perils of the grammar revival' in *Basic Issues New Challenges: Conference Report March 17th-19th 1995* International House London

Williams J 1995 'Focus on form in communicative language teaching: research findings and the language teacher' *TESOL Journal* 4:4 12-16

Willis D 1990 *The Lexical Syllabus* London: Collins ELT

Paying lip-service to CLT

Scott Thornbury directs the teacher training department at International House Barcelona and has an MA TEFL from the University of Reading. He has run training courses in England, Spain and New Zealand and was a speaker at the ELICOS Conference at Fremantle in 1995. He has written ELT materials for Longman, Heinemann and CUP.