A Survey of

Communicative Language Teaching

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Communication language teaching attempts to make use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. Students are presented with situations that they are likely to encounter in real life. It is quite different from the audio-lingual method (also known as the Army Method) of language teaching which relies on repetition and drills as the communicative approach tries to create an atmosphere of suspense which will then leave the students unsure as to how a class exercise will end and this in turn will create an environment which removes any 'boring' aspect from the learning experience. The real-life simulations change from day to day and the students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

Margie S. Berns, an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, writes in explaining Firth's view that "language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)" (Berns, 1984, p. 5).

In her book 'Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction And Sample Activities' (1993) Ann Galloway says that “teachers in communicative classrooms will find themselves talking less and listening more becoming active facilitators of their students' learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as referee or monitor. A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, however. The students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986)."
The birth of the communicative approach came about because educators and linguists were unhappy with the audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods of foreign language instruction and they felt that students were not learning enough realistic, whole language, they felt students were only being subjected to mindless, repetitive drills that they were that they were voicing like so many parrots. They did not know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions. They knew how to ‘do it’ but not how to ‘use it’. Interest in and development of communicative-style teaching blossomed in the mid 1970s as authentic language use and classroom conversations where students engaged in real communication with one another became increasingly more popular.

Since the 1970s the communicative approach has been adapted to the elementary, secondary, and high school levels, and we now see many teaching methods that are off-shoots of this approach some of which include notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction, and communicative language teaching.

The Survey

The purpose of a survey is to collect data. The data collected is usually used in research. Survey research is often used to assess thoughts, opinions, and feelings. The research can be specific and limited, or it can have more global, widespread goals. Psychologists and sociologists will often use survey research to analyze behavior while the media use surveys when attempting to evaluate political candidates, public health officials, professional organizations, and predict advertising and marketing trends. They are also used to compare the attitudes of different populations as well as look for changes in attitudes over time. A good sample selection is important and as in any scientific experiment it is important to collect sufficient data so that you can get an accurate reading. In biology and physics experiments we use a minimum of 10 trials to collect the data. The strategy involved in a survey is that we collect the same information about all the cases in a sample. Usually, the cases are individual people, and among other things we ask all of them the same questions.³ This is what I have done. I have collected 10
samples of each question and I hope this has given my survey sufficient validity to be accurate. My questionnaire consisted of 15 questions and a space in which the teachers could describe any special teaching technique they might have. The majority of my questions were multiple choice with the possible answers ranging from never to always. In this survey, it was my intention to find out how many of my co-teachers used Communicative Language Teaching techniques or had heard of this method as well as to collect information about any of their special teaching techniques.

My opening question was to ask the teachers who took my survey what grade of school they taught. The majority of them (60%) teach high school.
Question 1 stated ‘I do all the talking in my class.’

The majority of the answers were ‘sometimes’ and ‘often’ with no teacher answering ‘always’. This was good to see as a class where the teacher dominates the class can be extremely boring to a student. These lecture classes often turn into a very passive ‘chalk and talk’ type class where the student can be seen sleeping or distracted possibly chatting on their cell phone.
Question 2 stated ‘Students speak English amongst themselves in an activity.’

Personally this is one area that I try to accomplish with my own students. I feel that as English teachers this is our primary mission, to get our students to use English, especially in conversation. I found that 60% of the teachers answered ‘sometimes’ and 20% said ‘always’. One teacher reported ‘never’ and I can only imagine that the class is one of beginners or possibly a writing class.
Question 3 stated ‘As a teacher, I balance my class with activities using the 4 basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.’

90% of the teachers use the 4 skills the majority of the class time. I feel that this is an important aspect of language teaching because there are two forms of output (speech and writing) and two forms of input (listening and reading) and I honestly feel that students need to develop all of these abilities if they are going to become truly proficient at understanding a language. By diversifying activities we also keep our classes more dynamic and they will be more interesting to the student and the teacher.
Question 4 stated ‘My activities are appropriate for the language levels of my students.’

If a student starts to feel frustration because they do not understand what is being taught they may become bored and lose interest. In order to avoid this situation it is important to have students in their correct level. The Zone of Proximate Development is the level that the student can achieve by making an effort thus stimulating the student by making the lesson challenging but it does not place it so far out of reach of the student that they give up. This is the level we should assure that our students are at.
Question 5 stated ‘I correct my students at the moment they make mistakes when they are speaking.’

There was a great disparity between the answers that I received in this question. 30% of the teachers report that they ‘always’ correct their students the moment they hear a mistake. Half of the teachers say they ‘sometimes’ do. This question is very interesting as it shows how many teachers are actually allowing the students to use the language to just ‘communicate’ in any way possible. Personally, I will try to use the correct way in answering the student in order to demonstrate the correct way in an indirect manner.
Question 6 stated ‘I feel that students enjoy my class and they are not bored.’

The great majority of the teachers feel that their students are usually happy and enjoy their classes the majority of the time. As this is an important aspect of the learning experience I was glad to see this result. When someone enjoys something then it is probable that they will pay more attention and also learn more. They will also participate as they find the activity interesting and so become more active and less passive.
Question 7 stated ‘I am very happy with the textbook I use in class.’

60% of the teachers reported that they are 80% of the time happy with their textbooks while 40% said they are completely happy with theirs. If the school allows the teacher the freedom to select their textbooks then I am sure this will make the teacher happy. They will be able to choose the book that they feel reflects their own teaching philosophy. Another reason may be that the quality of textbooks on the market have improved considerably and are now much more balanced and more attractive thus stimulating interest. The layout of a book can be just as important as the actual information it contains.
Question 8 stated ‘I am free to conduct my class as I see fit with no control from the administration.’

The answers here are very interesting because we find that there is a lot of difference in the way the different school administrations permit teachers to run their classes. Or this could be a difference in personal opinion that the teachers have with regards to what freedoms they think they should have. Perhaps one teacher feels he or she has enough freedom while another teacher in the same circumstance would feel otherwise. Whatever the reason, 30% of the teachers feel that they seldom have the freedom that they would like to have.
Question 9 stated ‘We have writing assignments in class.’

Half of the teachers reported that they ‘often’ have writing assignments in their classes while 30% said they ‘sometimes’ do. Only 10% report that they ‘always’ have writing assignments. The answers here are somewhat in agreement with the answers of question 3 although not exactly the same which leads me to interpret question 9 as meaning that while the teachers do use the 4 skills, they may place more emphasis on writing than I would have expected.
Question 10 stated ‘I use language drills in class.’

The majority of teachers use drills very little or not at all which means that they are moving away from this traditional approach that was so popular at one time in language instruction. 20% of the teachers do report still using it in all of their classes so it is still being used. Does it work? I feel that while it becomes boring and redundant most of the time, it may have a use at times when the students have a need to practice certain pronunciation points. The bottom line is that it is rote learning and can be very boring to the majority of students leading to a loss of interest.
Question 11 asked ‘Have you ever heard of Communicative Language Teaching?’

This answer was divided evenly 50-50. This question was simply to find out how many teachers have had instruction in the different approaches and methods. Many of the teachers seem unaware that there are a great many alternatives to the methods they are actually using. This question precludes question 12 which investigates further.
QUESTION 12

What teaching method do you use?

All the teachers answered but the responses to this question were varied.

1 answered ‘inductively’.

1 answered ‘communicative’

1 answered ‘old fashion school’ (‘prescriptive’)

1 answered ‘PPP, talking, and participation’

1 answered ‘listening to music’

3 answered ‘I do not know’

1 answered ‘I do not employ a specific teaching method per se but simply build upon the needs of the specific comprehension level my students exhibit.’

1 answered ‘I really do not know. I consider important that students have the opportunity to use the language to express themselves (speaking, writing, reading and listening). My class does not include grammar or language structure, we just use the language to learn about literature.’

As I said before, I feel that there are many teachers who are unaware of the different methods available and who are probably not being as effective as they could be. 30% honestly answered that they do not know. I feel they have the potential to be better teachers if they were willing to explore the many teaching options available.
Question 13

How do you treat errors?

The answers to this question were also extremely varied. Several teachers reported that they correct the student at the moment they hear a mistake which is what they marked in question 5 but I was hoping they would elaborate more on their methods. Another teacher said that it depended on the topic or objective. This teacher said that if the focus of the class was grammar then he/she would correct the student at that moment but if the objective was reading or speaking then they would just correct the most important ones. One teacher says that he/she has the student repeat each word 30 times while another has the student do extra homework. Still another says that when the error is oral then the teacher repeats what the student said so that the student realizes what the problem was. I found the answers to be of interest as there was not really any specific trend here. I felt that most of the teachers really had no definite plan with the exception of two. They wrote:

‘First of all I would like to make reference to my answer for the fifth statement above: I correct my students at the moment they make mistakes when speaking – seldom. I allow my students to express themselves as best they can first without interruption from me correcting them at the instant they make a mistake; otherwise you would impede their train of thought and then they usually would give up even trying to speak. After they have finished I usually go up to them personally (not in front of the whole class) and repeat what they have told me but structured correctly. The only time I would correct them at the instant and in front of the class would be only if they ask for my help.’

And

‘I try to ignore most of them so students do not feel threatened. In terms of my class, it is more important for them to use the language than for me to correct little mistakes. When a mistake is recurrent, and no one in the classroom figures it out, I
include the expression in my exposition asking students to notice the correct expression.’

Both of these answers seem to reflect the philosophy of Communication Language Teaching and both of these teachers marked on their questionnaires that they are aware of what CLT is.
Question 14 asked ‘Are you familiar with the concept of communicative competence?’

This question was also divided evenly as question 11 was so it would appear that the teachers who are familiar with CLT are also the same teachers who are familiar with communicative competence. It is possible that those teachers who answered yes are younger teachers who have recently completed their college studies and that this information is being included now in the different programs but this is just a possible hypothesis.
Question 15  At the end of my questionnaire, I included one last question and several teachers answered it but many did not. I have written their answers here.

If you have any special comments about your teaching techniques, could you please include a short paragraph?

- ‘I try to include my students in all my classes, to have them involved in everything we do, but some groups are not cooperative so I end teaching a class I do not like.’

- ‘I usually work with beginners so I have to use a lot of images in class. I also try to include material that is attractive to the kids. I use examples in which I include the names of famous people they like, etc.’

- ‘Listening to music and reading the lyrics at the same time brings a listening-reading-understanding lesson.’

- ‘I feel that one very important aspect of teaching is to always try to build a student’s confidence in their ability to acquire and learn a foreign language. So many students come to class with a ‘mental block’ about learning a language in that as much as they would like to learn English they feel it’s above and beyond their capabilities. I try building their confidence by always starting off with very basic activities that incorporate many common words they probably already know and little by little make them realize that they know more than what they thought. I always emphasize reading and listening comprehension first before moving on to oral and written expression. A student will always find being a receptor of information first is easier than being a transmitter of information.’

I thank these teachers for taking the time to write these opinions and I found all of them very interesting.
Conclusion

I found this survey an extremely informative and interesting exercise. I was quite surprised by some of the answers. As the Communicative Language Teaching approach is one of the most successful and one that I feel teachers should be incorporating into the methods at least in part, it was very surprising for me to see that many teachers, even if not familiar with the approach by name, do not include at least the concepts in their day to day class strategies. I feel it is important to make a dynamic learning atmosphere for our students that will motivate them to do more. It will also let them become more proficient at actually using the language in new and unique situations by learning the 'whole' of the language rather than just using pieces. I do feel that grammar exercises are extremely useful at times as we should have as our ultimate goal the learning of the prestige version of a language as this shows education and not being merely content with a pidgin or Creole version, but it is important for the student to create communication first. The stages that students go through should parallel the stages described by Chomsky as this shows true language learning.

I truly hope that I can become a better teacher by doing this type of activity as it helps me to focus on the learning needs of my students as well as the many different teaching approaches and methods that are available to us teachers. We are students from the day we are born. Our life is one continuing learning experience and when we became teachers we took on a huge responsibility to facilitate that learning experience in our students. We must continue to learn ourselves in order to better facilitate that learning experience in our students and I feel it is our obligation to do our best so that our students will be able to do their best. The information is there for us to use if we just take the time and make the effort to learn it. It is too easy to just become complacent and become mediocre but if we do make that effort the rewards will be infinite. There is nothing like having a student come up to you at the end of a class and say, “That was a really interesting class. I really enjoyed it.”
Bibliography

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Survey CLT

Please answer the following questions for my survey on Communicative Language Teaching. Thank you.

Grade of school taught:_________________________

1- never  2- seldom  3- sometimes  4- often  5- always

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Have you ever heard of Communicative Language Teaching? Yes ( ) No ( )

What teaching method if any do you use? ________________________________

How do you treat errors? _____________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Are you familiar with the concept of communicative competence? Yes ( ) No ( )

If you have any special comments about your teaching techniques, could you please include a short paragraph.