

Communicative Language Teaching vs. Audio – lingual Language Teaching: A Compararison of Two Popular Language Teaching Approaches

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Introduction

Teachers of ESL / EFL have, over the years, resorted to various types of approaches, methods, and techniques in their endeavours to help their students attain an acceptable level of proficiency in English. Some have been more sucucessful in their efforts than others.

Communicative Language Teaching vs. Audio-lingual Language Teaching

The aim of this article is to compare and contrast communicative language teaching with audio-lingual language teaching. Of the various approaches used in language teaching such as traditional approach (grammar-translation); the direct method (as used in the commercial Berlitz language schools world-wide); aural-oral (audio-lingual) approach; situational language teaching; communicative approach (notional/functional approach); co-operative approach, etc), the two most popular approaches used have been the audio-lingual and, lately, the communicative approach.

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Although I use the word lately above in referring to communicative language teaching, the reader should bear in mind that the communicative approach is in fact not that new. The origins of communicative language teaching in fact date back to as early as the 1970s. (This approach has also been referred to as the notional/functional approach.)

There has, in fact, been a development of two versions of communicative approaches to language teaching, a “strong version” and a “weak version”. This latter version (weak version) is more prevalent in the last ten years or so and stresses the significance of “providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes.” Moreover, such an approach to language teaching “attempts to integrate such (verbal) activities into a wider program of language teaching.”

The “strong version” or “form” of communicative language teaching forwards the belief that language is acquired through communication.

The audio-lingual approach (also referred to as the “oral approach” and the “aural-oral approach”) preceded the communicative approach and was popular as a way of learning a language quickly (and effectively). This structural linguistic approach developed as a counter-reaction to the earlier traditional grammar approach (grammar-translation) whereby the

study of language was linked to philosophy and a mentalist attitude to grammar. A new interest in phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax grew, not only in the United States but also in Europe. An important part of structural linguistics was that the main medium of language was oral in nature. Speech was the real language. Writing was secondary. Because of the audio-lingual approach, speech had a priority in language teaching.

In time, other approaches became popular and today, most English language texts “claim” to use a communicative approach. (Note that today's English language texts available commercially and which use a communicative approach are for foundation level English only, not for advanced levels of English. I shall have more to say on this point later-see the Conclusion below.)

I shall briefly summarize here, some of the main differences between the two popular approaches to language teaching : audio-lingual vs communicative language teaching as contrasted by Finocchiaro and Brumfit.¹

Audio-lingual Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasizes structure and form more than meaning 2. Emphasizes memorization of structure-based dialogues 3. Language items are not necessarily contextualized 4. Language learning is learning structures, sounds, or words 5. Over-learning or mastery is encouraged 6. An important learning technique is drilling 7. Native-speaker like pronunciation is sought 8. Grammatical explanation is avoided 9. Communicative activities only come after much drilling and exercises 10. Students (and teachers) are not supposed to use the native language (such as Thai) 11. The use of translation is not allowed at the beginning levels 12. Speech is learned first followed by reading and writing | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meaning is very important 2. Dialogues, if used, center around communicative functions and are not usually memorized. 3. Contextualization is a basic premise 4. Language learning is learning to communicate 5. Effective communication is the goal 6. Drilling may also take place but peripherally 7. Comprehensible pronunciation is the goal 8. Any technique which helps the learner is accepted 9. Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the beginning 10. Some native language (such as Thai) may be used 11. Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it 12. Reading and writing can start from the first day if desired |
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¹ Finocchiaro and Brumfit, *The Functional-Notional Approach: From Theory to Practice*, 1983.

Audio-lingual Language Teaching

13. The target linguistic system will be learned through the overt teaching of the patterns of the system
14. Linguistic competence is the desired goal
15. The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory
16. The teacher is expected to specify the language that students are to use
17. Accuracy is the main goal

Communicative Language Teaching

13. The target linguistic system will be learned best though the process of struggling to communicate
14. Communicative competence is the desired goal
15. Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language
16. The teacher cannot know exactly what language the students will use
17. Fluency and acceptable language is the main goal

Conclusion

As earlier stated, the main aim of this paper is to give a brief comparison/contrast of the two widely accepted approaches to foreign language teaching. However, in conclusion, it is appropriate to take this brief look at this “communicative approach” in language teaching a step further. Perhaps the following excerpt by Jack Richards sums up the potentials (and pitfalls) of communicative teaching:

“He adoption of a communicative approach raises important issues for teacher-training, materials development, and testing and evaluation. Questions that have been raised include *whether a communicative approach can be applied at all levels in a language program* (whether it is suitable or workable for teaching ESL at BOTH the foundation levels and the advanced levels); whether it is equally suited to ESL and EFL situations; whether it requires existing grammar-based syllabuses to be abandoned or merely revised; how such an approach can be evaluated; how suitable it is for NON-native speakers; and, how it

can be adopted in situations where students must continue to take grammar-based tests.”²

Such kinds of questions asked by Jack Richards, the well-known American communicative language teaching expert, will have to be dealt with if the communicative movement in language teaching is to be taken seriously by language educators world-wide in a global environment. ◇◇

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² Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers, Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching – A Description and Analysis, 1998.

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