

What is the Communicative Approach?

The Communicative Approach – or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) – is a teaching approach that highlights the importance of real communication for learning to take place. In this post, you'll find definitions, examples and ideas for classroom activities.

Background and definition

In the Communicative Approach, real communication and interaction is not only the objective in learning, but also the means through which it takes place. This approach started in the 70s and became prominent as it proposed an alternative to the then ubiquitous systems-oriented approaches, such as the Audiolingual method. That means that, instead of focusing on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary (grammatical/linguistic competence), the Communicative Approach aimed at developing the learner's competence to communicate in the target language (communicative competence), with an enhanced focus on real-life situations.

This change has had a huge impact on classroom materials, course books, teaching techniques and the teacher's role in the classroom, and still influences English language teaching and learning up to this day.

Some key features of the Communicative Approach

Lessons have communicative aims

Communicating meaning is the main goal in CLT, and language is seen as a tool for learners to reach this aim. For this reason, the syllabus of courses that adopt

a Communicative Approach to teaching favour lesson aims that will help students practice and develop their linguistic competence, rather than their grammatical competence. In order to achieve this, different types of syllabi were created, amongst them, the functional-notional syllabus, that enables learners to focus on the meaning (function) of language and practice it in a realistic setting:

Besides that, the syllabus might also include work on the four skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking), as their development is vital for students to perform real-life goals. The skills are many times worked with simultaneously in what is known as integrated-skills approach. For instance, in a listening lesson, students can be asked to watch a video online and post their opinion about it in the comment section. Instead of just asking learners to leave their comment, the teacher might work on the appropriate language, vocabulary and register for this text explicitly, integrating the writing skill in a listening lesson.

This is desirable when adopting the Communicative Approach because it seems more realistic: in genuine communication, skills are seldom employed in isolation, and an integrated-skills approach simulates what happens in real life. The source of the texts in skills lessons is also important. In the Communicative Approach, authentic texts are usually favoured, as they might provide learners with exposure to a more genuine use of language.

Teacher acts as a facilitator in the learning process

In the Communicative Approach, learners are at the centre of instruction. That means that the teacher's role has changed when compared to previous methodologies such as Audiolingualism and the Direct Method. The teacher is now seen as a facilitator in the learning process, and some of the responsibilities attributed to them are:

Fluency and accuracy practice

In order to help learners improve their communicative competence, it is important to provide a range of practice activities. Although the ultimate aim is genuine communication, there is room for activities and exercises that ensure students practice language in a more controlled manner, focusing on the development of accuracy. These should not, however, be the only source of language practice. Activities that focus on the development of fluency are a vital part of a Communicative Approach lesson, as they give learners the opportunity to communicate meaning.

Activity types and classroom tips:

As the teacher is not the centre of instruction anymore, activities in the Communicative Approach usually favour student-student interaction and maximize learner's opportunities to speak. The activities below can be used to provide learners with practice of the language, and the level of support given might vary depending on the stage of the lesson, the lesson aim, and the students' level of ability. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that preparing students to perform tasks is a vital step for the successful completion of activities and the development of their communicative competence.

Here are some activities that can be used in a Communicative Approach lesson:

Role-plays

In role-plays, learners are given an imaginary situation and are asked to perform a different role or act as themselves in a particular scenario. Role-plays enable learners to imagine themselves in realistic situations and "rehearse" before they need to use English in real life. They are also fun and motivating for some learners.

Information-gap activities

Information-gap activities require learners to talk to each other and find out missing information they need to perform a certain task. The information missing might include

words, numbers and even drawings. The main point is to get students to talk and work collaboratively to share all information they need.

Jigsaw activities

Jigsaw activities involve learners reading, listening or performing different tasks at the same time and later sharing what they have done with their peers. For example, half of the students can be asked to watch a video on a certain topic and the other half can be asked to watch a different video, with a different viewpoint. After learners watch the videos and complete tasks for comprehension, they are asked to share what they had found out with their peers.

Open-ended discussions and debates

Debates and discussions can be a useful tool for fluency practice. They enable learners to share their own views on topics and use their communicative resource to convey ideas, make points, and agree and disagree with others. Debates are usually engaging and provide a rich resource for teachers to assess their learners' communicative competence. However, preparation for debates should be done thoroughly to help students succeed.

Developments of the Communicative Approach

After its advent in the 70s, the Communicative Approach branched out into different approaches and methodologies that aim at helping learners develop their communicative competence and is now a term that encompasses different approaches to teaching and learning. Some of these approaches are:

Project-based learning

Task-based learning

Content-based instruction