

# The Benefits and Influential Factors of CLT in the Japanese University Classroom

著者	FRITZ Robinson
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# The Benefits and Influential Factors of CLT in the Japanese University Classroom

Robinson FRITZ

コミュニカティブ・ランゲージ・ティーチング (CLT) は、コミュニケーションに使えるべく言語運用能力を高めることを目的とした教授法で、これまで、国内外での教室内における言語教育に強い影響を与えてきた。

本稿は、本学にて CLT を実践する利点と、CLT を行うに当たって障害となりうる社会・文化的な要因について議論したものである。

## Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (hereafter referred to as CLT) has influenced the teaching methodology of language classrooms all over the world. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the benefits of the CLT approach within my teaching environment - a Japanese tertiary classroom. This paper discusses the influential socio-cultural factors that are present in every Japanese classroom and the conclusion of this research is that these factors play an extremely significant role. They do make the CLT approach difficult, but I have found that with understanding and consideration, the CLT approach is not impossible to implement within my own teaching environment.

## 1.0 My teaching environment

Before I go into explaining the benefits of using a CLT approach and also the factors influencing my classrooms, I will first describe my teaching environment. I teach at a private university in Japan that specialises in four-year language degrees in English, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, French and German. English majors have the opportunity to study for one year in the USA or UK. There are approximately 1000 students on campus and a third of the student population are overseas students from China, Korea, Taiwan, France, Germany, USA and UK. The majority of the students are Japanese students aged between 18 and 22.

The English department consists of four foreigner teachers and seven Japanese teachers. I teach 10 different classes a week that range from core language skills such as reading, conversation and composition to specialised subjects such as British culture and English for tourism. I teach mostly Japanese students, but approximately 15% are overseas Chinese students. All teachers in the department are free to use their own teaching methodology, choose textbooks and make their own course syllabi and tests. I personally use a CLT approach in my classrooms for three main reasons; the first is to develop student's English communicative abilities; second is for my students to gain confidence using English by testing their own self hypotheses that they have learnt. My final reason is to give students, especially those that wish to study in the USA or UK, an opportunity

to sample a learning environment commonly found in classrooms of those countries. The reasoning behind my decision of using a CLT approach will be the main theme throughout my paper, and I will also discuss the various factors that exist inside and outside of my classroom that makes the implementation of the CLT approach difficult. Before discussing all of these issues, let us first establish the theory behind CLT.

## **2.0 CLT: A functional view of language**

Language learning is learning to communicate. This is the simplest way to describe the ethos behind CLT and also to demonstrate the emphasis placed on a communicative approach to teaching. While traditional teaching methods such as the audiolingual method have put importance on students acquiring grammatical structures, the CLT approach aims for students to use language to get things done (Nunan, 1988: 25). The driving force behind this ideology is that in the CLT approach language is seen in functional rather than structural terms (Richards & Rodgers, 1992: 17). In the functional view of language, focus is placed on the semantic and communicative dimension rather than the grammatical one, and this leads to “an organisation of language-teaching content by categories of function rather than by categories of form” (Richards, 1994: 18). Grammar rules and the ability to make coherent language are still important to the CLT approach, but learners are taught that language is a dynamic resource that is used to create different meanings within different social situations (Nunan, 1989: 12).

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the semantic and communicative properties in the functional view of language suggests that a relation exists between the meaning of words and the context that they are produced in. Revel (1988: 4), for example, comments that language “...does not occur in isolation...it occurs in a social context and reflects social rather than linguistic purposes”. From this we can deduce that social context influences the language decisions of a person and skill in grammar alone is not enough for language users to understand and be understood by other language users. This is reflected in my students as the majority of them have had a pre tertiary English education that doesn't recognise language being more than just a grammatical system. Ultimately this is one of the main reasons that has left them unable to successfully communicate and to negotiate meaning in English. Willis and Willis (2009: 3) reiterate this fact by pointing out that many Japanese students, after spending six years of English education that concentrates on the acquisition of grammatical structures, still do not have a “usable competence in English”. Therefore competence in another area other than ‘grammatical competence’ is needed, and this brings us to define and discuss the driving force behind CLT – communicative competence.

## **2.1 Communicative competence**

Communicative competence is the ability to use language correctly to successfully communicate with other language users. It has helped shift importance in language teaching from knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical and sentence structure to the ability to use language in specific contexts (e.g. Hedge, 2000; Munby, 1988; Revell, 1988). It was derived by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes as a reaction to Noam

Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance (Munby, 1988: 7). Chomsky stated that the knowledge of the language system – linguistic competence - informs language users to produce language – performance. However Chomsky's theory didn't account for the speaker being able to produce language successfully with different people in a variety of different social events (Hedge, 2000: 45). This led Hymes to concentrate on the social and cultural factors influencing language and language users in order to develop his theory of communicative competence (Munby, 1988: 14). The fundamental basis for his theory was that the language user's ability to use language not only depends on knowing grammatical and syntax rules, but also on understanding the use of language in context (e.g. Byram, 1997; Canale & Swale, 1980; Munby, 1988).

Therefore knowledge of linguistic competence alone is not sufficient enough for language users to effectively negotiate meaning. Communicative competence is generally recognised to consist of 5 elements - linguistic competence; pragmatic competence; discourse competence; strategic competence and fluency (e.g. Canale & Swale, 1980; Canale, 1983; Stern, 1993; Hedge, 2000).

Linguistic competence is concerned with vocabulary, grammar, word formation and pronunciation (Canale, 1983: 7). Researchers agree that linguistic competence is an essential part of communicative competence and also of *any* second language programme (e.g. Canale, 1983; Hedge, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 1992). Pragmatic competence deals with understanding social distance, indirectness and the other person's intended meaning. Discourse competence involves the efficient use of cohesive devices efficiently in speech or writing, also the ability to maintain, develop and negotiate turn taking in a conversation. Strategic competence consists of coping strategies that language users utilise to initiate and maintain communication or overcome breakdowns. Finally, fluency is the speaker's ability to produce smooth and unrestrained speech.

What these features of communicative competence entail is that teachers have to do more than give students grammatical rules to learn. By using a CLT approach, teachers can demonstrate how language is used in context, explain how language can be specific to different situations and teach the differences between formal and casual language. If the goal of the student is to use language for communication, especially intercultural communication, then we can start to see the advantages of using a communicative approach in the classroom. Other beneficial reasons of using a CLT approach and the English needs of my own students will be discussed further in later sections of this paper; however I will first describe the CLT approach in the classroom.

## 2.2 CLT in the classroom

The CLT approach is characterized by emphasizing interaction in the target language with the teacher and other students in a wide range of speaking, writing, reading and listening classroom activities. (e.g. Canale, 1983; Nunan, 1991; Richards & Rodgers, 1992). These activities allow students to learn, test and develop their communicative competence abilities. Hedge (2000: 13) further adds that this interactive environment "... pushes learners to produce more accurate and appropriate language". L2 pair or group work allows learners to successfully negotiate meaning and develop their strategic and discourse competence by teaching learners

strategies of turn-taking, paraphrasing and preventing communication breakdown.

The benefits of learners acquiring English strategic and discourse competence ability are apparent, but teachers must be mindful of the socio-cultural differences that influence both L1 and English in order to understand any student confusion and difficulty for developing English strategic and discourse competence. This suggests that teachers should teach the different conventions of communication (social, verbal and non-verbal) between L1 and English. Therefore, we can allow students to be aware of socio-cultural factors in both L1 and L2. All of this implies that students need ability in cultural or intercultural competence and this would be especially beneficial for my students that wish to work, study or travel abroad.

### **2.2.1 CLT and authentic texts**

Another feature of CLT that I utilise in my classes is exposing students to “authentic texts” such as newspaper articles, recipes, comic strips, radio plays, television documentaries etc (Hedge, 2000; Nunan, 1989). This gives students the opportunity to deal with “real language” in the classroom and helps students to learn and develop their real language skills. Porter and Roberts (1981, cited in Nunan 1989: 55) point out that many ELT classroom materials, for example listening materials have features such as intonation, pronunciation and turn-taking that are purposely simplified and therefore different to everyday speech. Also by using tasks in the classroom based on these authentic texts, learners can actively engage in meaning focused activities to develop fluency rather than accuracy (Willis & Willis, 2009: 3).

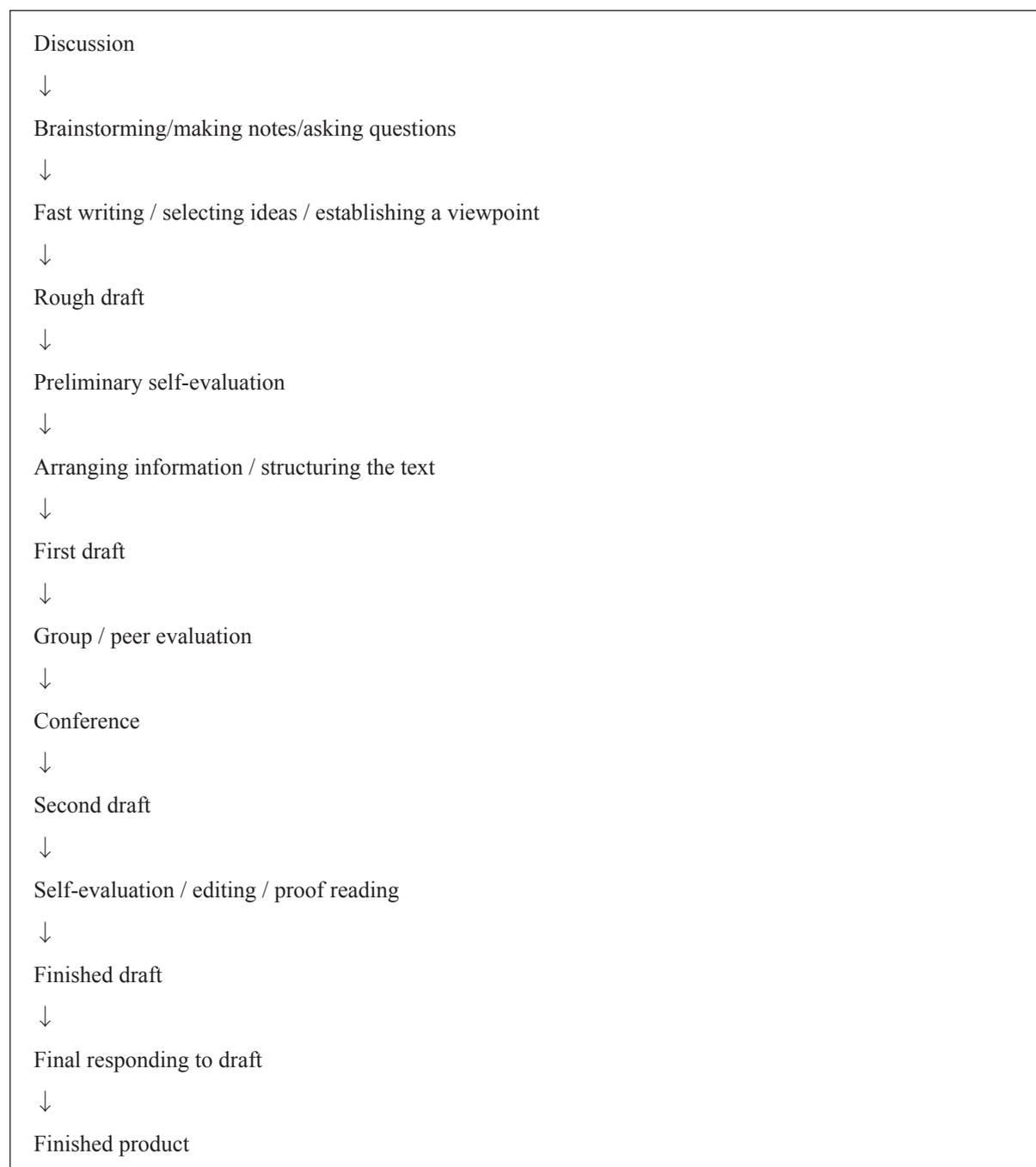
For example, a lesson using authentic texts can have a main task involving identifying fillers from a typical everyday speech discourse text or movie dialogue. This can serve to introduce the students to how fillers are used and pre-task or post-task activities could involve comparison to L1 fillers or conversational practice in the use of English fillers. The aim of using tasks in the classroom is beneficial for my students as they try and meet “real world” student needs and goals such as; developing skills necessary to obtain goods and services and acquiring English language skills for daily life when they study abroad. However from my experience, students with little experience with authentic texts do find their first encounter to real language inside the classroom demoralising and difficult due to their unfamiliarity of the complex features such as vague language and idioms. Through careful planning and mindfulness of the potential difficulty of authentic texts used, teachers can slowly help build learner’s self-confidence and stop anxiety.

### **2.2.2 CLT: encouraging learner independence by learning processes**

Another area that the CLT approach can aid students is by developing and encouraging learner independence. One example of this is teaching learners the process of writing, rather than concentrating on the final product. White and Arndt (1991: 7) demonstrate this by suggesting a sequence of writing activities (see Figure 1 below) and this is a model that I closely follow in my composition classes. However students trained in the product

approach initially find the process approach confusing, but by carefully and thoroughly explaining the intentions and purposes of the process of writing, the students' composition skills vastly improve over a semester. Also in this approach the teacher's role differs with the traditional role of merely correcting and evaluating, as the teacher also takes on the role of the reader that gives comments and feedback for the student to respond to in the rewriting of their draft. This process writing approach also encourages students to generate ideas from brainstorming, try their ideas by arranging and structuring the text, and evaluate their ideas by peer correction. Revising and re-editing also imply that writing is a non-linear process, which again differs with the traditional approach where importance is given to the final product.

**Figure 1: sequence of activities to teach the process of writing (adapted from White & Arndt 1991)**



Until now we have seen the benefits of using a CLT approach in the classroom, however there are influential factors that exist which make the choice of using CLT in a Japanese university classroom a challenging one. Let us now turn the focus of the paper to these significant factors

### **3.0 Factors influencing the choice of adopting a CLT approach**

The factors influencing the choice of adopting any teaching approach in any country will involve educational attitudes at the micro level and also societal attitudes at the macro level. However the three main factors that I believe affect the choice of using a CLT approach in my teaching environment are pre-tertiary English education in Japan, ‘classroom culture’ and existing expectations of teacher and student roles. Common contextual influences such as other teachers, heads of department, inspectors and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) do not have a direct influence on my teaching methodology due to me having autonomy over course content. Each of the three factors mentioned here will be discussed in the following sections of the paper. My personal point of view is that these three main factors make the possibility of using a CLT approach in own teaching environment difficult, but not impossible.

#### **3.1 Pre-tertiary English education in Japan**

English education in Japan is closely associated with entrance exams that allow students to gradually advance from junior high school to university (e.g. Komiya-Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004; Mc Veigh, 2002; Mulligan, 2005). These entrance exams have gained an important and notorious status due to the ranking system of Japanese schools (De Mente, 2004: 119) and my experience of teaching at the pre-tertiary level in Japan has led me to believe that entrance exams have caused an ‘English for exams’ culture, as McVeigh (2002: 36) points “...schooling [in Japan] is a type of training for how to sit for and pass examinations”. This has caused a negative effect that pressures pre tertiary level teachers to teach English for the entrance exams and this pressure intensifies in the students who under parental and societal pressure find their motivation in English is just to pass the exam.

These exams focus on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and the translation of complex passages (Komiya-Sammiy & Kobayashi, 2004: 251), but communicative elements such as speaking are not included and only in 2006, a listening component was added to the unified university entrance exam. Because of this, communicative activities are given much less importance in the pre-tertiary classroom and this is one reason why many students start their university education with poor communicative skills (Willis & Willis, 2009: 3). Here we can see a potential problem of trying to use a CLT approach with students that have been taught English based on a dominantly grammatical view of language. This raises questions as to whether a communicative approach of teaching English is possible at the tertiary level in Japanese education. However if we assume that university students are studying English to satisfy communicative needs that are socially or career related, then we can argue that, although the CLT approach at the tertiary level might be difficult to apply, it is essential

for these students. Also shifting the focus from a grammatical view to a functional view of language has the potential to allow students to change the focus of their own motivation from being primarily instrumental i.e. studying for exams, to become principally integrative or intrinsic in order to let students achieve their goals more successfully.

### **3.2 Classroom culture**

The second main factor that influences the choice of using a CLT approach in a Japanese university classroom is “classroom culture”. Student and teacher beliefs, their roles, interaction and cognitive styles are all part of the “classroom culture” which helps to create their version of ‘normality’ in the way things should be. Holliday (1994: 28) argues that classroom culture is influenced by “...host institution, student, professional-academic, wider international education-related and national cultures”. Therefore we have to consider the wider social context in order to understand Japanese classroom culture better. Japan is often described as a collectivist society (e.g De Mente 2004; Hendry, 2003; Hofstede, 1986) and the group mentality of “...respect for society, established order” and “...value group goals above individual interests” (Carson, 1992: 39) associated with collectivist societies is reflected in the Japanese classroom.

From my experience of teaching Japanese students, many students are unable to make opinions and speak freely within the classroom due to the sociological concept of “face”. Haglund (1984: 72) argues that opinion giving and expressing feelings is a “gamble” to Japanese people because “if what is communicated appears ludicrous or inappropriate to others, there is cause for the speaker to suffer dreaded loss of face”. This leads to one of main problems of using a CLT approach as not being able to express oneself freely is at odds with the CLT ideology of encouraging learners to test their own hypotheses of the language by taking “communicative risks” through “communicative events” in the classroom (Savignon, 1991: 273).

Lack of awareness of socio-cultural factors like this can cause confusion and frustration for both the Japanese student and the foreign teacher with little or no experience of Japanese society and culture, as each party sees their version of ‘normality’ based on their own socio-cultural rules to be true. Potential practitioners of the CLT approach within the Japanese classroom must realise how existing traditional beliefs of student and teacher and roles are deeply buried in these socio-cultural rules. This leads us to the last main factor – teacher and learner roles in the classroom.

### **3.3 Teacher and learner roles in the classroom**

Within the classroom, this factor is perhaps the one that makes the CLT approach difficult to implement due to the differences that exist between traditional teaching methods, traditional teacher and learner roles with those found in the CLT environment. First of all, let us discuss the roles found in the Japanese classroom.

Language teaching in Japan is associated with traditional teacher-centred classrooms and the teaching methods associated with these environments; teachers and students using rote memorisation to teach and learn vocabulary, dialogues to memorise vocabulary and structural patterns and drills to repeat the teacher's model as accurately as possible (e.g. Gorsuch, 2000; Komiya-Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004; Mulligan, 2005). The relationship between teacher and student is asymmetrical where the teacher's authoritative role is typically considered as "The students do as [the teacher] says so [the students] can learn what the teacher knows" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 17). The teacher's function is seen as "...instruct, transmit, regulate and assess" and students "...receive and absorb" (Hedge 2000: 83). This passive role of learning that the student conforms to is further accentuated by the little student initiation and student interaction of the teacher-centred classroom.

In comparison, the CLT teacher is often considered to switch role between facilitator, independent participant, analyst, counsellor and group process manager (Richards & Rodgers, 1992: 77). Through taking on these varying roles, the teacher's goal is to promote communication in the classroom through a less dominant role and giving back students the responsibility for their own learning (Larsen- Freeman, 2000: 129). Through an active learning role, learners are allowed to participate in communicative tasks and teachers encourage learner self-assessment). Furthermore, students in the CLT classroom are encouraged to interact not only with the teacher, but also with the learning materials and other students (Knight, 2001: 158). This provides not only an interactive learning environment, but a reflective one. Learners develop individuality, spontaneity and also critical thinking as they have the chance to put into practice what they already know and also use the knowledge they gain by formulating opinions.

Due to the unrestrained nature of this language activity, error production is also encouraged in the classroom. Revell (1988: 8) explains that error production is welcome as teachers allow students to test their own hypotheses about language within different contexts and situations, thus allowing students to independently find their own boundaries of the L2. This approach makes learners more in control of their own learning process and dependent on other students or the teacher only when the need occurs. Ultimately this is because the goal for the learner in the CLT classroom is to gradually achieve fluency and become independent (Brown, 2007: 113).

Due to the different methods, approaches and roles with the traditional classroom and the CLT classroom, we can see how students dependent on the teacher to produce rules and initiate communication can be confused in the communicative classroom. We can also understand that students that have only acquired linguistic competence abilities will too be confused in a CLT environment. University CLT teachers in Japan must recognise student's existing cognitive abilities originating from their pre-tertiary education and also be aware of their expectations of teacher and student roles in the classroom. Lack of awareness of these issues could make the possibility of using a CLT approach in any tertiary Japanese classroom a problem and demoralizing for both student and teacher.

However even though these socio-cultural factors make the CLT approach challenging in the Japanese classroom, we have seen the benefits of CLT to a student's English education.

## 4.0 Conclusion

Using a CLT approach in my teaching environment is beneficial for the students, but due to socio-cultural differences and students' pre-tertiary English education it is not a straightforward choice to implement. However, by using a CLT approach in my classes I have gradually seen positive results of students increasing their communicative skills and confidence. The biggest challenge so far has been to change my students' pre-conceptions of teacher and learner roles due to their long experiences of learning English in a traditional teacher-centred environment. Also finding an innovative and efficient way to test and evaluate students in the CLT environment has inspired me to research further into testing for CLT. In conclusion, the CLT approach in my teaching environment presents many advantages for my students to develop, improve and increase their L2 communicative abilities.

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