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Working With Students' Mindsets About Communicative Language Learning

Robert Wyss explains the differences between the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and Communicative Language Learning (CLT) approaches and advises how the latter strategy can be implemented by teachers so that students will be able to achieve their language learning goals.

Before they know what's hit them, most first-time visitors to Italy find themselves seized unawares by a phenomenon known as "the Stendhal Syndrome." Onlookers stand speechless before the peninsula's ancient architectural wonders. There are the splendors of Rome, such as the Coliseum, the Pantheon, and the indomitable columns of the imperial fora. And out in the countryside, among waving fields of grain, rows of colossal aqueducts stretch toward the dusky horizon like ancient Roman legions marching off to war. All these sights inspire awe.

Then there is the panoply of medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art, timeless masterpieces burgeoning the countless museums and churches. Finally there are the Italians themselves, equally at home in the worlds of antiquity and modernity; a people mindful of the colorful dialects in the provincial towns and proud of their tantalizing culinary and winemaking heritage. Although many younger Italics hazard their last euro to keep pace with the latest trends—high—tech PCs and cell-phones, slick scooters, costly designer fashions, and so on—the Italian people nonetheless remain deeply conscious of the history which everywhere pervades and informs their daily lives. Indeed, they are part and parcel of that history.

But what has all this got to do with the art of Teaching English as a Foreign Language? Well, a great deal actually. Or more precisely, it has to do with what educators of antiquity



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called *forma mentis* (mindset); that is, the way a person's native culture, family background, and formal education shape their specific worldview. In the TESOL vernacular *forma mentis* might be defined as the fixed set of ideas a person holds about what constitutes "good" language learning pedagogy, notions which derive from the learner's exposure to language learning and teaching approaches.

In Italy (where the writer taught for several years), the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has dominated language pedagogy in secondary schools and universities until very recently. GTM appeared in the late 1700s in Germany as a preferred method for teaching Latin and ancient Greek to secondary school pupils. With course objectives focused exclusively on the accumulation of linguistic knowledge, students memorize vocabulary lists, engage in elaborate grammar analysis, and translate difficult passages by classical authors. Admittedly, in Italy, the approach often succeeds in achieving its aims. Thanks to GTM, many Italians can recite passages from Ovid and Virgil by heart in the original Latin as well as translate Latin and Greek with impressive ease and accuracy.

So what's so bad about that? Nothing of course, so long as the overall learning objective lies solely in acquiring linguistic information for cultural enrichment. Many people today, however, study EFL and ESL in order to meet specific and practical communicative exigencies—Italians included. And while language researchers have been busy the past twenty years or so developing and implementing communicative-based course syllabi, many an English language learner's *forma mentis* has by contrast remained stuck in the 18th century with its learning-by-rote pedagogy. In other words, many learners still cling to antiquated ideas about language learning and teaching, assumptions which are often counterproductive to meeting desired communicative competence aims. (This is particularly the case with middle-aged professional people, for whom an EFL or ESL course may represent their first exposure to formal learning in a long time and their first ever exposure to the approaches of communicative language teaching and learning.) So an implicit, ideological rift frequently divides teachers and their learners even before the first day of class. Let's take a closer look at this methodological gap.

H. Douglas Brown suggests that CLT is perhaps the most significant trend in foreign language learning and teaching in recent times. "As the field of language pedagogy has developed and matured over the past few decades, we have experienced a number of reactions and counter-reactions in methods and approaches to language teaching. We can look back over a century of foreign language teaching and observe the trends as they came and went. How will we look back 100 years from now and characterize the present era? Almost certainly the answer lies in our most recent efforts to engage in communicative language teaching (CLT)" (Brown, 1994).

The following lists of the main features of the two approaches reveal the methodological chasm that separates CLT from GTM:

Grammar-Translation Method (Prator and Celce-Murcia, as cited in Brown, 1994)	Communicative Language Teaching (Brown, 1994)
1. Much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists of isolated words.	1. Students ultimately have to use the (target) language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts.
2. Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given.	2. Classroom goals are focused on all the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.
3. Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words.	3. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.
4. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis.	4. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes.

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So how will Italians and other traditionally-minded learners around the globe react to CLT in the classroom? Is it safe to assume that most learners will be able, if willing, to forgo familiar grammar-based curricula in exchange for a communicative language learning syllabus that is wholly or partly centered on such language functions as identifying, reporting, requesting, offering, denying, expressing opinion, and so on?

It may come as a surprise to English instructors who have never taught beyond the academic confines of native Anglophone countries that a number of their learners will initially fail to appreciate what CLT advocates have come to value above all else; namely, a comprehensive communicative approach which at times values fluency over accuracy, which keeps learners meaningfully engaged in using the target language in the classroom, and which enables learners to take responsibility for their own learning process. Some learners may view such activities as role-play and semi-guided conversation as precious time squandered on mere “chatting” or “playing silly games,” time which could be put to better

use memorizing lists of vocabulary or taking dictation or dissecting the finer points of subjunctive conditionals. Moreover, traditional teacher-centered learning approaches provide students something familiar—exercises and activities which challenge neither their spontaneity nor creativity. Such approaches, which are in some respects outdated, feel “safe” to many learners.

Unless EFL instructors are willing to dismiss teaching approaches and techniques grounded to any extent in CLT, learners will have to get updated on communicative language learning and teaching—and the sooner the better. But how can this be done? How can language teachers, in effect, bring their learners’ *forma mentis* up to date? The following list contains four guidelines which the writer has developed and followed over the years in an attempt to answer this important question. It was designed to 1) help teachers familiarize their learners with communicative language learning and teaching approaches, and 2) to help students learn to appreciate the functional activities and exercises implicit in a CLT syllabus.

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“Either stand or sit,
but don’t wobble”.

1. Know thyself

Before attempting to instill appreciation in your learners for communicative language learning and teaching it is essential that you, the language instructor, are conscious of why you do what you do. Take a moment to reflect on your teaching approach. Compare your approach with those of other instructors you know. Is yours more effective or less effective than the others? Why? Identify the basic features which characterize your communicative teaching approach.

2. Inform learners

Be open with your learners. Discuss your teaching approach and the goals you have set for your learner’s right at the outset of the course in simple, non-technical language using graphs or charts. Do this in the learners’ mother tongue if possible. Focus learners on the cyclical nature of the communicative language learning process. Even something as simple as writing a basic progression on the board, language input ? practice ? review ? further practice ? new input ? practice, and so on, and explaining your and your students’ respective roles as they relate to this cycle will help learners conceptualize the communicative learning process. They will begin to see how in-class communicative activities are essential components of the bigger picture of the overall learning process; they will also begin to understand how your role as a teacher is in large part dependent on the participation expected of them as learners.

Take time to go through the syllabus together with learners. If you don’t do this already, you may be surprised to discover how much students appreciate it. Invite questions and explain how the course syllabus enables them to reach their communicative competence goals.

Discuss CLT and other recent trends in language learning and teaching from time to time; show how your syllabus takes these into account. Engage learners in developing and discussing their personal goals for the course and show how these goals are already implicit in the syllabus. Emphasize a learner-centered pedagogy and encourage learners to view the course as a mutual endeavor which requires effort from both the teacher and learners.

3. Emphasize progress

Indicate milestones of progress periodically; demonstrate to your learners how the CLT approach has in fact “worked” thus far in bringing them nearer to reaching their communicative competence objectives. Have learners record their progress in a journal.

4. Stay your ground

As a wise Zen Buddhist monk once advised his disciples, “Either stand or sit, but don’t wobble”. Once having discussed your CLT approach with the class and taken into account any your students

may have, it is important to stick fairly closely to the course syllabus you have devised. Most learners will eventually come to see the value of a communicative teaching style in time, despite its apparent unorthodoxy. In fact, many of your students will come to appreciate your efforts all the more for having introduced them to a “new” and effective way of reaching their English language communicative competence goals.

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