

# Balancing Communicative Language Teaching and Grammar in Taiwan

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## Abstract

Grammar plays an essential role in the sentence combination in a language. For a non-native English speaker, it is necessary to learn how to pronounce an exotic sound as well as its variant syntax. For years, teachers have over emphasized on guiding the grammar rules in the class in Taiwan to help students have a better performance in English written examinations or enter to an ideal higher education. Oral drill is neglected in a regular teaching activity. Therefore, students can only recognize the words instead of speaking it out and hardly communicate with people orally. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) may solve the unbalanced language learning situation. The goal of CLT is to develop communicative competence. Frequent oral practice speeds up the process of developing the spoken skill for a language. Teachers can design activities according to a specific grammar lesson for a whole class through the CLT method. It can make up for the shortage of English teaching in Taiwan. Student will not only meet the examination requirements, they will also develop their spoken skills.

**Key Words :** grammar rule, oral drill, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), communicative competence, design activities

## **I. The General Situation in Schools in Taiwan**

In Taiwan English is a foreign language, people do not speak it in their daily life. Normally, students start to study English in the first year of junior high school at the age of 13. In the past, some private elementary schools have English class for the sixth grade pupils who are instructed by a native English speaker. There is also English learning club which is open for the pupils from third to sixth grade twice a week and forty minutes for each period. Some public elementary schools have extra informal English classes for the pupils who are interested in learning English conversation. In these extra classes teachers are from the private English language learning center and the tutorial fee is paid by the pupils' parents. English is a required course in junior high and senior high school. After nine years of compulsory education in elementary and junior high school students must take an entrance examination to enter senior high school. After graduation from senior high school students must take a university entrance examination. English is one of the required subjects in both the tests. The tests mainly emphasize reading, grammar, and composition. Since there is no speaking test during the examinations, most English teachers focus primarily on grammar. Besides using an assigned grammar book for the English class, the students will buy other kind of grammar books for self-studying and to keep in mind the grammar rules. Teachers always require that students read supplementary booklets in order to improve their reading comprehension for the tests.

The function of English teaching in school is examination oriented. That causes English learning to be concentrated on grammar rather than oral communication. Most English classes in Taiwan have teacher-centered instruction. Teachers control the classroom environment and talk endlessly to give students the necessary knowledge that focuses on grammar rules and memorization. The

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medium of instruction is Mandarin Chinese. Most teachers put the grammar rules on the blackboard and explain them in Chinese. They usually use English when they read the contents of a book, and have the class repeat after them. If there is no time to read out loud, students have almost no chance to speak an English word during the class. Classes are usually large, with 50-55 students. Students spend three or four hours a week in English class. Because of the emphasis of entrance examination requirements for a higher school, students need to keep grammatical rules firmly in mind to do well on the written tests. The classroom atmosphere is strict, formal, and boring. It is one-way communication – teacher to students – that illustrates the negative concept of teacher-centered instruction.

In a normal English class in Taiwan students get bored easily from memorizing grammar rules and doing the exercises mechanically. That is why students do not have much enthusiasm to learn English. Students usually take notes and keep silent during the class. It is hard to get students to speak in class. The less they use English, the less flexible the students are when they talk. That is also the reason why most students cannot express themselves fluently with English after several years of learning.

Fortunately there are other options for students to develop their communication skills. One method is to subscribe to a monthly self-improvement English radio script magazine to develop their English by rote memorization from instructional radio programs. Some high schools select one of the magazines for supplementary materials. In general, the magazine is divided into three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. Each level always has at least one native English speaker to introduce the lesson. Sometimes a Chinese teacher will attend the class to give explanations. Students/readers select the program that matches their needs. They can listen and repeat what the teacher says on the air. Each program takes half

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an hour and is rebroadcast at different times to meet different readers' schedules. There are also tapes available for the readers. Besides this, students may also go to a private language center, a cram school, or engage a tutor to receive individual instruction. One or more of these options may help students improve their listening comprehension and their English oral skills. Those functions can just make up the deficiency of learning spoken English in normal schools. However, most of those private institutions focus on grammar instruction. They usually try to help participants to get a high score in English written tests in order to attract more people to come. The class size is always bigger than those in the regular school. Some even accommodate 500 persons in one room. In such a crowded situation, why are there still so many students appeared is a question that the concerned authority and the schools should take a cautious consideration.

The policy on English language study is changing now. English continues to become more and more popular in the world. The Ministry of Education claimed that the English has become a required course for the fifth and sixth graders in September, 2001. Moreover, if possible, the English class will start in the third grade(ctnews, kimo July 2000). The teachers are selected by a strict condition and trained professionally with a qualified certificate. Then they can be admitted to teach the graders. The English learning situation will make improvement in the future hopefully. The media point out that students' English proficiency in Taiwan is placed the last two in the Asia. One reason is that most students are deficiency in listening comprehension and discourage from expressing orally. Therefore, it is very important for students to strengthen their listening and speaking ability in English. The school system will not alter the traditional teaching method in a short time. During the transition period, informal school systems have developed rapidly in Taiwan and contribute to student needs by enhancing their abilities in listening

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and speaking English. Improvement of listening and speaking should be the most important goals in English language teaching.

## **II. CLT may be one way to improve English language teaching in Taiwan**

Students attempt to improve their English grammar knowledge in preparation for the entrance examination and balance their spoken skills for oral communication. How can English teachers design an English class to both teach grammar effectively and teach spoken English without making it more difficult for students who need to pass “the” examination? Teachers may connect the current teaching method – Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) – with grammatical instruction. The goal of the CLT class focuses on communicative competence with fluent and acceptable language. In the communicative classroom, students have to apply the language creatively and productively in unrehearsed contexts (Brown 213).

It is the teacher’s responsibility to facilitate the students’ learning motivation. Teachers should provide the students with a learning environment of daily life conversation to improve their speaking ability. This would better prepare students for life outside the classroom. Realistic situations can provide students with the opportunity to use English in a variety of occasions and to learn to communicate effectively. According to Byrne: “in order to be able to communicate effectively, the learners also need an adequate mastery of grammar and vocabulary”(11). People cannot communicate unless they know the bits of the language system. Textbook exercises in an artificial language are not comparable to the actual communicative situation outside of the classroom. Richards indicates that many proponents of CLT have advocated the use of “authentic,” “from-life” materials in

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the classroom(80). In CLT class, students are encouraged to interact with other people through pair and group work. The size of the class and time for each period have no strict limitations. The elementary requirement is that every student must have an opportunity to do oral practice. The role of the teacher is to facilitate the communication process between all of the students. As Richards states "CLT procedures often require teachers to acquire less teacher-centered classroom management skills"(78). Students are encouraged to deal with unrehearsed situations under the guidance, but not control, of the teacher. It is a two-way communicative situation center -- students to students and students to teacher.

Using CLT method in grammar class will create an active learning environment for students. The teachers can provide interesting activities to achieve the goal of CLT. Many activities can be developed where students use particular structures without feeling they are learning grammar. For instance, the grammar targets are on the continuous tense. Many students have no ideas about them. Teacher may write a few model sentences and answers on the blackboard and tell the students that before they begin. Use their imagination and tell the other people what they see, be sure to use the continuous tense(Holder 23). Activities that apply grammar rules help students to organize their thoughts correctly before they speak. Any standard grammar drill or exercise can be transformed into communicative activities.

### **III. Reasons to try CLT in Taiwan**

In Taiwan the English language class that requires teachers to prepare students for traditional examination preparation is difficult to change to CLT. Compared with the present situation, using CLT in English language teaching is a direct and effective way to improve verbal competence. It can make up for the shortage of

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English teaching in Taiwan. Students will not only meet the examination requirements, they will also develop their spoken skills. The more oral practice students have, the better their speech becomes. Ultimately, the school can be worthy of their name as an educational place for people.

In order to establish a well-developed CLT environment in Taiwan, some inappropriate traditional situations have to change and coordinate with CLT to work; such as teacher-centered instruction, textbook contents, classroom arrangement, and time period increases. The teacher-centered direction should shift into student-centered dominance. There is a danger of the teacher taking too much time presenting the lesson so that the students do not get enough time to practice the language themselves. Although native tongue is acceptable, teachers should take special training to promote their oral proficiency in leading students to use the language. General textbooks are fixed in their contents. That does not attract students' attention. The instructional materials are considered a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use. They have the primary role of implementing communicative language. The English teacher may adopt those textbooks to direct and support CLT. Almost every class is rather big(50-55 students) and students always sit in rows. The teacher often ignores the students in the rear. One way to improve this situation is to arrange the seats in a circle or groups so that students may actively interact with one another. Moreover, instead of standing on the front of the classroom, teacher may stay among the students so as to keep track of student participation in activities and shorten the distance between teacher and students. In order to consider both grammar teaching for examination requirements and CLT for practical conversation learning, the general time period is not enough for both cases. Commonly, students have three English classes a week for grammar instruction. They need another two or three periods for leaning

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oral skills. If the time period can increase, the textbook content and classroom arrangement can be improved, and the teacher-centered instruction can be changed to student-centered, the Communicative Language Teaching will work successfully in Taiwan. Students need not rely much on English radio programs, private language centers, or hiring English tutors to improve their listening and speaking abilities. Teachers can design activities for a whole class through the CLT method.

#### **IV. Activities which can be used in a CLT classroom**

Activities which are clearly designed to promote fluency may contribute to a mastery of the language system. In order to transfer from classroom to real-life situations, the classroom activities must simulate the requirements of an actual language interchange as closely as possible. Activities like the ones suggested below may encourage students to use English in the classroom and expand its use into outside situations. Whatever activity the teacher design, he should first rehearse the activity with another English language speaker(perhaps another teacher) to anticipate which expressions students will need for the particular situation(Mckay 57). Most class sizes in Taiwan consist of about 50-55 students. The activities explained below can fit into either large classes or classes that are divided into small groups.

##### **1. Working in groups.**

Having been assigned a particular grammar unit, students in groups of three or four discuss the most important points in this unit such as singular and plural verbs or use of conjunctions. The teacher goes from group to group without intervening, but takes notes of confusions or errors to provide explanations after the small groups are finished. Small group work should be encouraged in the crowded classrooms of Taiwan because students have to practice using the

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grammar in each lesson. Group work should be applied extensively to classes at any level. By continually dividing into smaller groups, every student can participate in these class activities.

2. Using model sentences.

Model sentences reflect actual situations that may really be used by the students. In order to communicate effectively students must not just know how to use the language correctly, they must also know how to use it appropriately. Different cultural backgrounds use different words for same thing. For example, many people in Taiwan call the toilet a “W.C.” English speakers, however, usually use “bathroom” or “rest room”. It is important to use appropriate words or sentences in conversation. This activity is suitable for intermediate level students.

3. Using objects.

Objects are effective tools for introducing a wide range of structures. As McKay indicates “using simple objects as visual representations of sentence components often helps students remember particular grammatical rules”(28). Using objects in the classroom is a way to reinforce grammatical rules as students describe the shapes and functions of objects. Thus students learn grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structures through descriptions. The learners will have deep impressions at their first sight of the objects to be described. It is an appropriate method for beginners. In order for the students to develop confidence in using spoken English, it is important to give them opportunities to express their real opinions. If the listeners are able to understand a speaker’s opinion, that is sufficient for this exercise.

4. Varying the content.

People get tired of doing the same thing over and over again, especially in a grammar class. Students have to memorize grammar rules as they learn them.

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Varying the content of the unit of study is one way to maintain students' interest as they continue to practice the same grammatical structure. In CLT class, the teacher should encourage students to express their own preference for changing the same content. The students at an advanced level, who have learned English about two years, can proceed in this way.

The current objective of English teaching in Taiwan is to prepare the student for the entrance examinations. Applying the activities presented above can create an active and effective environment to learn grammar rules through practical manipulation.

## **V. Conclusion.**

At all levels of achievement the students need to be given regular and frequent opportunities to use language freely, even if they sometimes make mistakes. That is not to say that mistakes are unimportant, but rather that free expression is more important. Sometimes the learners may know that they produce an error and know the correct form, but they know the error will not interfere with what they have to say. On the basis of CLT, and by providing more effective activities, the traditional grammar class that emphasizes grammatical rule teaching will become more useful and practical. It also elevates the students' learning motivation. To use CLT in Taiwan builds hope of better language achievement by encouraging students to speak. When first implementing CLT, many problems may occur. For instance, the teachers' original teaching style that has been used for several years cannot and will not change. The original teaching situation in Taiwan emphasizes language examinations to enter a higher level school. Students are not encouraged to develop conversational skills because teachers establish reputations as a result of their students' written test scores. Therefore, the teachers are the key factors in

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improving the bad situation. However, after extended use of CLT, teachers can design a questionnaire to evaluate students' performance and gather information as the basis of teaching-method improvement. By developing an evaluation for CLT, teachers would know weaknesses and strengths of their teaching. Teachers can then better prepare their students for an examination that includes oral skills. Nowadays, many educators and scholars advocate that the written test pattern of English subject matter must be changed during the entrance examination in order to cater to the needs of oral communication. The examination should add an oral section in the English subject area. By implementing an oral examination, CLT can be developed thoroughly in the traditional language class and perform successfully in oral English learning.

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# 溝通式教學與文法教學的融合

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## 摘 要

在語法構句當中文法的知識是基本以及必備的條件。在臺灣的英語學習過程當中，爲了獲得良好的筆試成績以便進入理想的學府，過度重視文法教學，以致忽略口語練習的機會。大部分的學生祇認識單字的意思，無法將字組合起來以口語的方式和人溝通。溝通式教學能夠解決此項不平衡的學習情況。溝通式教學的目標是培養溝通的能力，藉由不斷的口語練習可以加速口語技巧的達成。教師依據文法內容，透過溝通式教學的方法進行的教學，學生不但能達到筆試的要求，也習得口語表達技巧。

**關鍵字**：文法規則，口語練習，溝通式教學，溝通能力，設計活動