ESL Lesson Planning: Incorporating Communicative Language Teaching and Whole Language in the ESL Classroom

Joanna S. Green

Colorado State University

EDAE 590
Abstract

This paper explores the integration of two approaches in the ESL classroom, Communicative Language Teaching and Whole Language. It is argued that since they are complimentary, using these approaches together create instruction that is holistic, authentic, and centered on the learner. Furthermore, this paper applies these approaches in the process of lesson planning. Finally, this paper examines the essential components of every lesson plan that are the result of specific, achievable, and measurable objectives.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Whole Language, lesson plans, objectives
Incorporating Communicative Language Teaching and Whole Language in the ESL Classroom

Two primary questions that novice ESL instructors typically ask are, “What should I teach, and how do I begin?” There are indeed countless theories and methods that instructors may consider in regards to these questions, however, determining the ‘best’ theory can be a daunting process. Many recent theories for adult language instruction have one thing in common: The learner is the focus of the learning event. In addition, “…Current ideas about language and literacy development point to the use of holistic strategies as an efficient way to develop and enhance the second language learner’s fluency” (Blake & Majors, 1995, p. 132). Moving forward with these trends compels the instructor to examine a holistic approach to ESL teaching, one that recognizes the whole learner (Schwarzer, 2009). Implementing Communicative Language Teaching and Whole Language philosophies in the ESL classroom can assist the teacher in creating lesson plans that are dynamic and focused on the learners (Schwarzer, 2009). Implementing these approaches into ESL instruction and demonstrating their effectiveness is the focus of this paper, as well as how to practically incorporate them into lesson planning through the use of measurable and achievable objectives.

This paper will begin with an introduction to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) followed by an explanation of why CLT is beneficial in an ESL lesson plan. Second, it will be demonstrated how the philosophy of the Whole Language approach, when used in conjunction with the CLT approach, is an ideal way for an ESL teacher to consistently approach language learning from a holistic perspective. Finally, the focus of the paper will shift from theory to practice by providing applicable ways to create successful lesson plans that are the outcome of measurable and achievable objectives.
Communicative Language Teaching

As previously stated, there are a myriad of ESL theories for language instruction, so why then is CLT a preferred approach? To answer this question, communicative competence must first be explained because it is essential for understanding CLT (Savignon, 2001). “Communicative competence describes the ability to use language in a variety of settings with varying degrees of formality” (Parrish, 2004, p. 9). Also, it embraces the need for a learner to be knowledgeable in areas concerning “language forms, social interactions, language skills, and learning strategies” (Parrish, 2004, p. 9). In fact, Parrish (2004) states that being understood is just as important to being able to write grammatically correct sentences. This is the essence of the CLT approach; being able to communicate in any setting.

CLT was developed as a response to the grammar-based and Audiolingual curricula that was ever so common prior to the 1970’s (Parrish, 2004). The core principles of CLT recognize that at the center of every learning event should be a focus on “fluency and the ability to communicate in a variety of setting in a variety of ways” (Parrish, 2004, p. 31). Supporters of Communicative Language Teaching believe that “the motivation of learners is often stifled by an insistence on correctness in the earliest stages of second language learning” (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013, p. 157). To encourage the students’ motivation, learners should work to develop fluency before accuracy (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013).

According to Parrish (2004), CLT may vary from classroom to classroom, but there are core principles that make up the essence of CLT. They include (Parrish, 2004, Table 2.1):

- The goal of instruction is learning to communicate effectively and appropriately.
- Instruction is contextualized and meaning-based.
- Authentic materials are incorporated from the start.
- Repetition and drilling are used minimally.
- Learner interaction is maximized; the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning.
- Fluency is emphasized over accuracy.
- Errors are viewed as evidence of learning.

If communicative competence is the focus of the classroom, then students will be prepared to communicate with those outside of the classroom through the CLT approach since it “requires the involvement of learners in the dynamic and interactive process of communication” (Savignon, 2001, p. 237). Savignon (2001) brilliantly explains: “The classroom is but a rehearsal” (p. 240). Through this “rehearsal,” CLT meets the goals of language learners to interact with those who speak the language because students are given the skills and practice to “approach their out-of-class lives as a language learning laboratory” (Schwarzer, 2009, p. 27).

In addition to the theoretical case laid out thus far for the CLT approach, it is relevant to note that research performed by Sandra Savignon lends the approach credibility in a real life classroom. Savignon’s (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013) study on the linguistic and communicative skills of 48 college students enrolled in a French language program, revealed the advantage of using meaning-based instruction in the classroom. The 48 students were divided into three groups: a communicative group, a culture group, and a control group. Each group had one hour per week devoted to special activities that were consistent with the label of the group. The tests at the end of the study revealed that the communicative group scored higher on the communicative tests. “Savignon interpreted these results as support for the argument that second language programmes that focus only on accuracy and form do not give students sufficient opportunities to develop communication abilities in a second language” (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013, p. 159). There was no difference in linguistic competence measures, which suggests that
all three groups were able to demonstrate similar linguistic accuracy (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013).

Having now established both the theoretical and practical merits of the CLT approach, it is of course worth noting that no model is without criticism or drawbacks, and this is also true of CLT. One of the main criticisms in literature is the broad scope of CLT, and because of this many teachers do not know how to implement CLT in the classroom (Wong, 2012). Depending on the interpretation of what CLT is, instructors or researchers may place little emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, or they may understand the goal of CLT to focus solely on communication (Wong, 2012). However, these potential drawbacks are not necessarily inherent flaws in the model, and therefore they should not be viewed as insurmountable challenges as Parrish (2004) and Schwarzer’s (2009) interpret CLT. Parrish (2004) describes the nature of CLT in a way that avoids the drawbacks mentioned by critics when she states, “Students develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills concurrently through this integrated approach” (p. 32). This author agrees with the focused approach of Parrish and Schwarzer, and while recognizing that the model may lend itself to potential drawbacks, it need not necessarily be so.

**Whole Language**

With the effectiveness of the CLT model in mind, and with the focus to avoid certain pitfalls the model may lend itself to, it is now appropriate to demonstrate the value of implementing the Whole Language model as a compliment to CLT in lesson planning. It is through the work of Savignon (2001) that the best argument for combining these two approaches can be made. Savignon (2001) states, “Where communicative competence is a goal, however, the most successful programs all have one feature in common; they involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network or relations between people, things, and events” (pp.
Further, Savignon (2001) adds that the language experiences in a classroom should be “affective and physical as well as cognitive” (p. 237). The Whole Language approach embodies this idea also by viewing the student as a whole learner rather than just as an ESL student. Schwarzer (2009) further states that when instructors view students as whole persons they are able to see their students’ “accomplishments, responsibilities, relationships, personal histories, and hopes” (p. 28).

Teachers embracing a Whole Language approach to learning should focus on integrating all language skills in their lesson plans (Schwarzer, 2009; Parrish, 2004). This approach similarly views learning as a task that should be taught in its entirety, holistically, rather than in isolated parts (Parrish, 2004). Further, students learn about culture, community, social rules, and as they learn they are able to apply their own knowledge and talents as they complete class work (Schwarzer, 2009). In these ways, it is not difficult to see how closely related it is to the CLT approach.

Further support for the Whole Language approach as a compliment to the CLT approach in lesson plans is observed in Schwarzer’s (2009) outline of the seven basic principles to Whole Language. Comparing these principles to CLT’s principles demonstrates the many similarities between these two approaches:

- A holistic perspective: Whole Language recognizes that language is best taught in its entirety rather than in smaller components, so that students can experience language in a “realistic way” (Schwarzer, 2009, p. 28).
- Authentic learning: Whole Language teaches in a “realistic way,” so students have the benefit of using language in a way that is meaningful to their lives.
Curriculum negotiation: Whole Language encourages teachers to involve learners in the decision-making process related to the curriculum.

Inquiry-based lessons: Teachers should encourage learners to ask questions and pursue answers to them so that they find the learning task more meaningful.

Language learning as a developmental process: Taking risks and making mistakes should be embraced because making errors is part of the learning process.

Alternative assessments: Using a variety of assessments helps the teacher “capture the breadth of learning that occurs in a class” (Parrish, 2004, p. 271).

Community of learners: Similar to the CLT approach, Whole Language also encourages teachers to help learners feel that they are part of a welcoming community that cares for them.

When comparing the two lists of core principles of CLT and Whole Language, a number of similarities can be noted, as well as a few differences. One difference in the core principles has to do with alternative assessments. Whole Language sees assessments as “effective tools to assess learners’ progress over time” (Schwarzer, 2009, p. 30). Because this author embraces the merits of assessment, complimenting Whole Language with CLT ensures a holistic approach to instruction that allows for a variety of assessments to help the whole learner measure progress as he or she seeks to achieve communicative competence.

**Important Parts of Lesson Planning**

If a hybrid of CLT and Whole Language are adopted as the instructional approaches that guide a teacher’s practice, then it is logical that lesson planning should reflect these approaches. This means, classes should provide opportunities to practice with the language in its entirety; lesson plans must take the students’ needs into consideration; and learning activities should
reflect real-life situations (Schwarzer, 2009). Of course, as Wlodkowski (2004) states, “When adults can see that what they are learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspective, their motivation emerges” (p. 142). Thus, an important aspect of CLT and Whole Language lesson plans is the need to make class material contextual, meaningful, and applicable to students needs. And since this is the case, Parrish (2004) states that teachers need to develop manageable tools to collect student input, which involve allowing students to prioritize or rank their needs. Even when teachers must use compulsory curriculum, the teacher should allow students’ needs and interests to be part of the curriculum as well (Schwarzer, 2009). This may require some level of inquiry, but is a step that should be at the forefront of lesson planning when using a hybrid of the CLT and Whole Language models.

An applicable example of a sophisticated type of inquiry is a study conducted by Derwing and Rossiter (2002) wherein they demonstrate how students’ needs must shape instruction. The researchers surveyed one hundred adult, full-time ESL students to examine their perceived pronunciation difficulties. The response from the students included: “55 respondents perceived that pronunciation was a contributing factor to their communication problem” (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002, p. 160). Based on the participants’ responses, the researchers concluded that pronunciation was not being taught or was taught ineffectively (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). Teachers may not have the resources to conduct a survey such as this. Nevertheless, the result of the survey demonstrates the ways in which a teacher may need to assess students’ needs to make sure that lesson plans do in fact reflect those needs, and are addressed in the lesson plan.

In addition to students’ needs, effective lesson plans require teachers to assess students’ prior knowledge. Teachers need to provide contexts and tasks in their lesson plans that help
students use what they know and fill in what they do not know (Schwarzer, 2009). One desirable way to do this is through using K-W-L charts: what do you know, what do you want to learn, and what have you learned (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012). “K-W-L charts also informally assess the quality and quantity of student background knowledge, which in turn can help inform a teacher’s instructional plan” (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012, p. 258).

Finally, daily assessments in the classroom provide a teacher with a visible tool to evaluate whether or not the students have met the objectives of the lesson plan. As Parrish (2004) states, “The best assessment tools are those that are compatible with the content of instruction, or the outcomes being assessed, as well as the approach to learning and teaching used in your class”. When students see their progress, they are motivated to keep learning (Parrish, 2004).

**Writing Measurable and Achievable Objectives**

Most teachers create learning goals for the year or the semester, and it is from these goals that the objectives are created (Bergman, 2010). Objectives are vital for lesson planning because they “provide direction and structure to the teaching and in so doing imposes a discipline on the teacher to select the most appropriate content for the session” (Pugsley, 2010, p. 204). Parrish (2004) reminds the instructor that objectives focus on what the learners will accomplish rather than on the teacher’s tasks for the lesson (Parrish, 2004). This is a noteworthy distinction that should guide teachers when determining objectives, and the remainder of this section moves forward with this as a guiding principle.

More specifically, lesson objectives guide the teacher’s practice, but they are focused on the learner. Objectives should be flexible and responsive of the students’ needs, which require a willingness on the part of the teacher to make appropriate modifications based on learner
feedback (Parrish, 2004). Pugsley (2010) agrees with this idea when she says, “…It is important to consider the specific group of learners that your teaching is aimed for” (p. 203). Thus, lesson objectives are typically written for one particular lesson, and they are specific in nature (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Not only are objectives specific, but they must also be able to be observed and measured (Smith & Ragan, 2005).

Objectives are observable when they reflect what students should be able to do when they have completed the activities for the lesson (Smith & Ragan, 2005). This is why objectives should include action verbs. Action verbs demonstrate what the students will do (Bergman, 2010) rather than what they will know since this kind of a statement is difficult to measure (Pugsley, 2010). It is the action verbs that help make the objectives measurable (Bergman, 2010). Measuring objectives is crucial because they provide a basis for assessing learning (Pugsley, 2010) because the assessments provide a tool for students to connect the learning with the learning objectives (Jones, Jones, and Vermette, 2010). The teacher needs to determine what the standards are that demonstrate success (Pugsley, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the Communicative Language Teaching and Whole Language approaches, as a hybrid model, are advantageous for a student-centered classroom, and an integrated approach to lesson planning. These approaches also help in the process of creating class objectives that best meet the learners’ needs. Using these approaches will help a teacher answer the question, “What do I teach?” It is the lesson plans and objectives, however, that provide further guidance in answering the question, “How do I begin?”

As Wldodkowski (2004) notes, it is the learners’ needs that should drive a teacher’s planning, instruction, and assessments. Listening to the students’ needs does not take away from
the necessity of lesson planning, and when teachers are willing to make appropriate modifications to the lesson plans based on the learners’ feedback could result in amazement. When the learning environment seeks the motivation of students, it is as Wlodkowski (2004) says, “Like a cork rising through water, their (students’) intrinsic motivation surfaces because the environment elicits it” (Wlodkowski, 2004, p. 142).
References

Bergman, D.J. (2010). Why do we have to learn this? Teaching goals beyond content. *The Clearing House, 81*, 129-132. doi: 10.1080/00098651003705905


