Re-Examining CLT: What Does It Mean to Be Communicative?

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Abstract

This paper argues that the L2 language teaching field has struggled to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) as it was originally conceived because theorists and practitioners have not reflected on the concept of communication deeply enough. As a result, the term CLT has come to mean very different things to different people. In order to move the field forward, the authors recommend that practitioners adopt VanPatten’s (2019) definition of communication. This paper first explains VanPatten’s definition in detail and gives examples of what kinds of practices and materials are communicative and uncommunicative. Next, the paper reviews other scholars’ criteria for judging communicativeness and discusses their relative merits in comparison to VanPatten’s definition. Finally, the paper states why VanPatten’s definition of communication, although it may appear narrow and constraining, is so necessary for current language teaching.

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, communicative tasks

Introduction

Since its inception over forty years ago, the concept of communicative language teaching (CLT) has been surrounded by confusion. It has always been a vague term that has been applied to many
different practices. As far back as 1982, Ellis (1982) noted that “the term communicative has no clearly understood and received meaning when it is applied to language teaching” (p.73) and Harmer (1982) bemoaned the fact that “everything is ‘communicative’ these days” (p.164). Nearly thirty years later, Littlewood (2011, p.541, in Arnold, Dörnyei and Pugliese, 2015, p.5) claimed that a “recurrent comment about communicative language teaching is that nobody knows what it is.” This lack of specificity applies to the Japanese context as much as anywhere else. When asked to define CLT, Japanese teachers of English named such features as “the need for communication, self-expression, exchanging opinions in English, understanding English utterances, not worrying about grammar, guessing from contexts and general comprehension” (Sakui, 2004, p.159). From such a list, it is difficult to see how these different points could come together into any kind of coherent definition. Since teachers do not seem to know precisely what CLT means, one must wonder why the term has continued to be so widespread. One reason for its omnipresence in the field is due to the influence of publishers, who advertise their textbooks as being ‘communicative’ in order to boost sales. It may also suit teachers to adopt such a vague term because it allows them to make only minor changes to traditional practice.

This paper attempts to answer the question: ‘What does it mean to be communicative?’ In particular, it focuses on how teachers can evaluate language teaching materials and the discourse of their classrooms to judge whether these are ‘communicative’ or not. The authors support the position advocated by the second language acquisition (SLA) scholar Bill VanPatten that the work of theorists and practitioners in our field who use the term ‘communicative’ needs to be informed by a working definition of communication (VanPatten, 2017). However, many teachers struggle when asked to give a definition of the term ‘communication’ (VanPatten, 2017). Indeed, the authors of this paper were equally unable to define what communication is clearly before being acquainted with VanPatten’s work. Given that it is standard practice in any academic endeavour for researchers and
theorists to define their terms clearly, this admission ought to promote concern and reflection. The field of second language teaching, however, has progressed with little awareness of the importance of having a working definition of communication, a concept that is referred to so frequently in everyday life that its meaning is taken for granted. This paper contends that many researchers have not thought deeply enough about what communication actually entails when they have used the term ‘communicative’ in relation to teaching. If we define our terms carefully, it will be possible to define CLT much more narrowly, and we believe this will help to move the field forward.

One of the original proponents of CLT, Sandra Savignon, has argued that the “essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence” (Savignon, 2002, p. 7). In other words, “communication should not just be the goal of CLT, it should be the process of instruction itself” (Thornbury, 1998). This view of communication as both a means and as a goal of instruction (Pica, 2000) has been criticised (e.g. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell, 1997, Arnold et al. 2015), but the present authors believe it to be incontrovertible. Learners learn to communicate by engaging in communicative acts. Therefore, teachers who aim to promote proficiency in their classrooms (as opposed to test preparation, for example), are compelled to provide opportunities for genuinely communicative interaction in their classroom. In order to plan for this, we need to know precisely what kind of materials and practices can promote authentic communication. Equally, we need to know which parts of current practice are not truly communicative and then reconsider their value.

In this paper, we will first present VanPatten’s (2019) definition of communication and discuss how it can successfully be used to judge the communicativeness of teaching materials and classroom discourse. As far as we know, this definition has not been reviewed in the literature before, and neither have we found an alternative definition with which to compare it. However, there have been alternative proposals in the literature of ways to categorise teaching activities as communicative or
otherwise. We will present a review of some of these examples and compare them with the adoption of VanPatten’s (2019) definition of communication. Although Ellis (1982) argued that the term ‘communicative’ could also be applied to syllabus design, we believe it will be sufficient to identify the core aspects of CLT at the level of classroom practices. Our position is that the communicativeness of L2 teaching can best be distinguished by analysing the activities or tasks that learners are required to perform in a particular class.

VanPatten’s Definition of Communication

VanPatten (2019), proposes a definition that is taken, in part, from the work of Sandra Savignon (1997): “Communication involves the expression, interpretation and sometimes negotiation of meaning in a given context for a given non-linguistic purpose.” This definition can be used to judge whether genuine communication takes place in our classrooms and also whether teaching materials would likely promote it. Let us consider some examples of L2 teaching materials and classroom discourse.

If, for example, a student responds to the teacher’s question, “What is the weather like today?”, would this be a ‘communicative’ exchange? The answer is almost certainly ‘no’, because this exchange does not meet the criteria for communication set out in the definition. In the posing and the answering of the question, the expression and interpretation of meaning do occur, but the purpose of the question is to elicit a particular set of linguistic items (a description of the weather). Since both the teachers and the learners already know what the weather is like, nobody is discovering new information. The goal of the exchange, therefore, is to practice language use, so we would describe it as a linguistic goal. However, genuine communication always has a non-linguistic goal. VanPatten (2017) asserts that these goals can either be psycho-social, which involve the development and maintaining of human relationships, or cognitive-informational, which involve the exchanging of
information. For reasons that will be explained later, cognitive-informational goals are suitable for language classrooms. A third goal, entertainment, could also be added, but this is best left to activities outside the L2 classroom.

VanPatten’s (2019) definition can be employed to analyse the communicativeness of materials aimed at any proficiency level and involving any of the four skills. Let us imagine listening materials, which involve learners listening to audio recordings and answering questions on the content in a textbook. Could we describe these activities as ‘communicative’? The answer is ‘yes’, if important conditions are met. When listening, students are interpreting meaning that is being expressed in the recording. If the teacher pauses the recording and a student asks for the meaning of a particular word or phrase, then this student could be said to be negotiating meaning (although the negotiation is limited because the learner is not talking directly to his/her interlocutor). In order to be fully communicative, however, this activity is required to have a non-linguistic goal and whether there is such a goal depends on the content of the recording and on what the learners do next. If the content of recording presents information that is true about the world, for example if the speaker describes tourist attractions in London, the activity is potentially communicative. If, however, the speaker in the recording tells information that is purely fictitious, such as voicemail messages which were made up by the textbook author, the learners cannot find out anything about the world. They are not obtaining any useful information; they are just practising language. Communicative tasks require the presentation of real information; fake information sells our learners short.

Simply listening to information about the world is not enough to ensure communicativeness, however. Learners also need to be aware of their non-linguistic goal while they are listening. In other words, learners must know while they are listening to the audio tracks that they will be required to do something with the information they obtain. A follow-up activity could take up one of various forms, such as filling in a table comparing sights in London with those in Tokyo, writing a survey about
London sightseeing spots, interviewing classmates about which sights they would most like to visit, and so on, depending on the time available and the ingenuity of the instructor. So far, we have outlined what a communicative listening task would look like and also what would prevent it from being described as communicative. Readers will probably have noticed that most published listening materials do not fit in with the conditions that we have proposed.

Similar criteria can be applied to written texts. Communicative reading activities also need to have a clear non-linguistic goal: this requires learners to use the information they obtain in the text for some pre-decided purpose. For example, learners could exchange information with classmates, integrate their knowledge and use their synthesis as a basis for a written reflection or presentation. Output activities are not essential, however. Just checking ‘True’ or ‘False’ next to a list of facts may be sufficient, if the goal is for learners to build knowledge about a place of interest which they apply in a later part of a communicative task. Skill-building exercises such as skimming or scanning practice aim to have learners copy certain native-speaker habits and therefore do not come close to meeting the conditions set out in VanPatten’s definition (this applies equally to explicit pronunciation practice). Reading stories may not involve learning facts about the real world, however, in ordinary life, people read stories for pleasure, so autonomously reading stories for pleasure is undoubtedly a communicative activity.

Since communicative is concerned with meaning and and not with conscious attention to linguistic form, any kind of grammar practice is uncommunicative. Some mechanical grammar drills may not even involve the expression and interpretation of meaning, because learners can complete them without understanding what they are saying or writing. Writing an essay could be communicative if the learner is aware that it is actually going to be read for its content, rather than marked only for accuracy. Writing five sentences to describe what a learner did over the weekend, in order to practice using the past tense, would of course, not be communicative according to VanPatten’s (2019).
definition because the goal is simply to practice certain language forms.

Next, let us turn to speaking activities. Activities or tasks which require learners to speak take many forms and many of them cannot be described as communicative if we apply VanPatten’s (2019) definition. Reading a dialogue does not require learners to express any of their own meanings. Having learners write a dialogue and then act it out does involve the expression of meaning, but there is no purpose other than to practice language. Having learners ask and answer a set of conversation questions is meaning-focused, but for reasons explained above, in a communicative task learners would probably have to do something with the information they obtained during their interactions with their classmates if there is to be a non-linguistic purpose. Motivated learners may enjoy simply asking and answering questions, and if they genuinely want to ask their interlocutors the questions they are given and are interested in their classmates’ answers, then it may be possible to argue that these learners are genuinely communicating. It is our experience, however, that such situations occur very rarely in institutional language classrooms, because teacher and learner interests do not fully coincide.

Role-plays are a speaking activity that have long been favoured by teachers who wish to promote their learners’ spoken fluency. They have also been used by teachers of English for Specific Purposes, to try to recreate in the classroom some of the communicative contexts that they are preparing their learners to navigate. Undoubtedly, role-plays allow for the expression and interpretation of meaning and do not necessitate a focus on form. Their non-linguistic purpose is questionable, however. An equally severe flaw is connected to the final element in VanPatten’s (2019) definition. Communication always occurs in a given context: this involves the setting, which is the classroom, and the participants, which comprise the learners and the teacher (VanPatten, 2017). This context is always fixed (VanPatten, 2017). Role-plays may attempt to alter the classroom setting, by having learners pretend to be customers or servers in a restaurant, for example, but the
power relationships of the classroom cannot disappear. Learners know that they are interacting with classmates who are merely pretending to be someone else, and they are also aware that their teacher is evaluating them. These factors will influence the way they behave during the role-play. It may be unfortunate and disappointing, but teachers need to accept that it is impossible to recreate ‘real-life’ situations in the classroom if we wish to teach communicatively. Role-plays, therefore, cannot be described as communicative tasks. This last point may prove controversial, but it is the logical conclusion of the definition of communication we have adopted. Another logical implication is that psycho-social goals are unsuitable for classroom activities. The fixed roles (learners and a teacher) in a classroom profoundly influence the development of its participants’ social relationships, and therefore it would be challenging to align learners’ individual psycho-social goals with task goals. For this reason, cognitive-informational goals are most suitable for communicative activities.

It may appear that we are arguing for teachers to discard substantial amounts of traditional practice. This is not our goal in this paper. What we are aiming to do is to inform teachers of what can and cannot be described as communicative. It is not our intention to state that non-communicative activities have no place in the L2 classroom, only to argue that several criteria must be met for teaching to be genuinely communicative. In fact, VanPatten (2017) stated that some partially communicative activities, such as those which involve the expression and interpretation of meaning but lack a non-linguistic goal, may have a useful role in that they may help to prepare learners to engage in fully communicative tasks. Skill-building activities like skimming and even pronunciation activities may conceivably have a useful place in the classroom, provided there is data to prove their effectiveness.

Criteria for Evaluating ‘Communicativeness’

In the following section, we will present a selection of criteria that have been proposed in the
literature for judging the communicative nature of classroom discourse and materials, discuss their merits and demerits and compare them with VanPatten’s (2019) definition of communication and its implications. Finally, there will be a discussion of the value of classifying activities as either communicative or uncommunicative.

Nunan (1987) argued that genuine communication is characterised by five features, which are summarised below:

1. The uneven distribution of information.
2. The negotiation of meaning.
3. Topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker.
4. The right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute to an interaction or not.

(Nunan, 1987)

Item 1 proposes the information gap as a feature of communication, which fits in with VanPatten’s (2019) definition to the extent that an information gap can provide an interaction with a non-linguistic goal. However, VanPatten’s definition is more comprehensive than Nunan’s proposal in that it allows for the fact that not all communication is based around information exchange. The negotiation of meaning is also described more accurately in VanPatten’s definition because this occurs only when there is a communication breakdown (VanPatten, 2017). Items 3 and 4, if they are valid claims, present a possible weakness of VanPatten’s (2019) definition, which includes nothing about topic negotiation or the rights of interlocutors to be silent. Nunan (1987) states that in genuine communication, “decisions about who says what to whom and when are up for grabs” (p.137). This view of communication is also reflected in item 3 of Fröhlich, Spada, and Allen’s (1985) proposed five features of communicative language teaching, which are summarised below:

1. Group work.
2. Focus on meaning.
3. Topic control by the teacher and the students or by the students alone.
4. The use of extended texts.
5. The use of semi-and non-pedagogic materials.

(Fröhlich et al., 1985)

Another possible feature of communication not included in VanPatten’s (2019) definition is proposed by Thornbury (1996), who argued that “communicativeness should be defined qualitatively”. The quality of communication is high when participants are both frank and considerate and speak willingly on topics that interest both them and their interlocutors (Puchta and Schratz 1993, in Thornbury 1996). It is necessary to consider whether topic nomination and control and ‘quality of communication’ are useful concepts when considering the meaning of the term ‘communicative’ language teaching. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that implicit in the views expounded by Nunan (1987), Fröhlich (1985) and Thornbury (1996) is the belief that the term ‘communicative’ relates primarily to the act of speaking. This is problematic because since communication can involve written and aural texts, we should be able to use the term ‘communicative’ for teaching of any of the four skills. Even if we focus only on spoken interaction, however, weaknesses in the assertions become apparent. Let us consider a police interrogation. Surely, nobody would deny that this is a communicative event. The person under interrogation would have no control over the topic and would likely not be speaking voluntarily on a topic of interest, so the quality of the communication, according to Puchta and Schratz’s (1993, in Thornbury, 1996) description, would be low. These are, therefore, not critical factors in judging the communicative nature of an interaction. One could argue that they are desirable features of conversations between adults who are in an equal power relationship, but desirable qualities are not crucial elements. In addition, it is questionable how relevant they are to the L2 classroom, in which teachers have to make choices about suitable classroom topics and may not be able to leave the content of interactions to the learners. It is also
difficult to see how the proposed criteria could be applied to classes of beginner-level learners who cannot engage in conversations in the L2.

The implicit assumption that communicative activities involve speaking can also be found in other proposals, such as by Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993, in Parry, 2000) and Ellis (1982). Pica et al. classified communicative activities into five types: jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making and opinion-exchange. In line with our arguments earlier in this paper, far more kinds of activity can be imagined. It must also be added that many of the activities suggested by Pica et al. would seem to be suitable for more advanced level learners who possess a high degree of oral fluency. It may be worthwhile to reiterate here that a strength of VanPatten’s (2017) approach is that it is applicable to all teaching contexts, even when the learners are complete beginners, and to teaching which covers all the four skills.

Ellis (1982) proposed five conditions which materials need to meet if they are to be considered communicative. These can be summarised as:

1. The success of an activity generated by the materials is demonstrated by its outcome and not by its process.
2. The speakers must be concerned with what they say, not how they say it.
3. There must be an information gap.
4. Spoken interaction must be negotiated rather than predetermined.
5. Speakers must be allowed to use whatever resources they possess to make meaning, even if this is not typical of native speakers.

Items 1 and 3 fit in with VanPatten’s (2017, 2019) assertion that communication has a non-linguistic purpose. Item 2 would seem to explain that when people communicate, they focus on meaning and not on form. This fact is an implicit component of VanPatten’s (2019) definition. If people have a non-linguistic purpose when expressing and interpreting meaning, then it is reasonable
to assume that they are not just practising certain language items. The importance of a focus on meaning rather than form constitutes the basis of Littlewood’s (2004) proposed continuum of activities that stretches from a non-communicative extreme to ‘authentic communication’. The defining feature of the latter is that there is a complete focus on meaning (rather than form) and that the language used is unpredictable. Harmer (1982) also proposed a similar continuum to Littlewood’s (2004), and argued that genuinely communicative activities have the following features:

1. Learners have a communicative purpose.
2. Learners have a desire to communicate.
3. Learners are focused on content not form.
4. Learners use a variety of language.
5. There is no teacher intervention when learners make a mistake.
6. The materials do not control the language used by the learners.

Ellis's (1982) view that learners cannot be forced to use certain predetermined language items in communicative activities is echoed in Harmer’s items 4 and 6 and is perhaps a reaction against the use of drills in the L2 classroom. While both these proposed continuums may contain some truth, they have limited value because they miss out several of the essential features of communication found in VanPatten’s (2019) definition, such as the role of context and the fact that learner output is not required for communication to take place.

Finally, let us consider the argument that distinguishing between communicative and non-communicative activities is unwise because so much depends on teacher implementation. Beaumont and Chang (2011), for example, argued that the dichotomy between traditional and communicative teaching activities is unhelpful, and instead, we should judge practice by learning outcomes. A similar point was made by Harmer (1982) when he claimed that it was problematic to view the term
‘communicative’ in “an ‘all-or-nothing’ way: either teaching is communicative or it is not” (p.165). This view, he argued, was a cause of the confusion around the term ‘communicative’, because, “students can learn to communicate in many different ways and as a result of many different techniques” (Harmer, 1982, p.165). We would disagree. It seems pertinent here to reiterate our point that communicative ability develops through engagement in genuine communication. The argument that any activity that indirectly leads to the development of communicative ability can be called ‘communicative’ would not only stretch the term beyond its usefulness but also deny Savignon’s (2002) core essence of CLT. Beaumont and Chang (2011) contend that “(r)eading aloud and dictation can be rendered communicative in any number of ways” (p.298). Applying VanPatten’s (2019) definition helps us to examine this claim. When reading aloud or doing a dictation, learners are not expressing their own meaning, and there is no discernible purpose except to practice the language, so it is impossible to call these activities ‘communicative’. Some teachers may be unhappy with such a declaration because it may be construed as a criticism of some of their cherished practices, but it is a logical conclusion, nonetheless.

Conclusion

Harmer (1982) argued that the term ‘communicative’ should not be applied to methodology for two reasons. Firstly, because “it will prohibit the use of many tried and tested techniques” (p.165). We believe, however, that if traditional practice is shown to be uncommunicative, practitioners need to be willing to acknowledge that and duly revise their perspective. We need to reconsider the value of what has come to be viewed as ‘tried and tested’ and remind ourselves of what CLT was first intended to be. We concur with Thornbury (1998), who argued that CLT, as it was originally conceived, has had little impact on current language teaching practice, and this has to change if the field is to move forward. Secondly, Harmer (1982) argued that the term ‘communicative’ “will have
to have a definition so broad as to be meaningless” (p.165). We disagree. The definition of communication proposed by VanPatten (2019), is, we would argue, actually a narrow one because it lays down conditions that are so precise. Indeed, teachers who adopt this definition to inform and guide their practice may feel constrained because it deems much of current L2 teaching practices uncommunicative. It may well be impossible to reconcile CLT with traditional language teaching, despite the arguments of some (e.g. Pica, 2000). However, VanPatten’s (2017) perspective offers a radical, clear-sighted and judicious roadmap to move CLT forward.

In this paper, we have given our support to the position advocated by VanPatten (2017) that communicative language teaching needs to be informed by a definition of communication. The definition proposed by VanPatten (2019) is comprehensive yet succinct. With the knowledge it gives, practitioners can analyse teaching practices and materials to judge whether they can be called ‘communicative’: this is to say, whether they offer opportunities for genuine communication. Such judgments are significant because learners learn to communicate by communicating and teachers need to organise their classes so that their learners engage in communicative events. This is not to imply that we advocate only the use of communicative activities in class: non-communicative activities may have a role to play. What we are arguing in this paper is that it is crucial for teachers to know the difference between communicative and uncommunicative practices according to VanPatten’s definition of communication.

VanPatten’s (2017) position is, as far as we know, unique in the literature. We have reviewed other attempts to analyse the communicative nature of classroom discourse and teaching materials, but they all miss out on some of the essential features of communication, such as the importance of context, and frequently apply only to speaking activities. We believe that a clear distinction between communicative and uncommunicative teaching is a necessary consequence of adopting VanPatten’s (2019) definition, and this is to be welcomed. This distinction can help practitioners to revise their
practices in a way that is logically consistent and illuminates the path towards a different type of instruction that fits in with the true aims of CLT that were first proposed more than four decades ago.

References


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