

### ROLE OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) STYLE TO IMPROVE SPEAKING FLUENCY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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#### Abstract

This article investigates the role of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in enhancing the speaking fluency of English language learners at the university level. Based on four years of practical classroom experience, the study explores how CLT principles — including meaningful interaction, task-based activities, authentic communication, and learner-centered instruction — contribute to measurable gains in oral language production. The article presents theoretical foundations of CLT, outlines specific classroom strategies, and illustrates their application through real teaching examples. Findings suggest that consistent implementation of CLT significantly reduces learner anxiety, increases willingness to speak, and improves overall fluency, particularly when combined with constructive feedback and a psychologically safe classroom environment. The article concludes that CLT, when thoughtfully adapted to diverse learner contexts, represents one of the most effective approaches available for developing spoken English proficiency.

#### Introduction

Speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging and anxiety-inducing skill for English language learners, yet it is also the one most immediately associated with language proficiency in everyday life. Learners who can read or write competently in English often struggle to express themselves orally with the same degree of confidence and fluency. This gap between passive and active language competence is one of the central challenges facing English teachers around the world, and addressing it effectively requires a pedagogy that places genuine communication at the heart of the learning process.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in the 1970s as a direct response to the limitations of grammar-focused methods that prioritized accuracy over meaningful use. Rooted in the work of applied linguists such as Hymes (1972), Canale

and Swain (1980), and Widdowson (1978), CLT shifted the goal of language instruction from the mastery of grammatical forms to the development of communicative competence — the ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and effectively in real social contexts. Over the past five decades, CLT has become one of the most widely researched and applied frameworks in English language teaching worldwide.

As a university English teacher with four years of experience teaching spoken English to learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, I have consistently found that CLT-informed instruction produces the most noticeable and lasting improvements in speaking fluency. This article aims to examine why this is the case — both theoretically and practically — and to offer fellow educators a set of evidence-based, classroom-tested strategies for implementing CLT effectively in their own teaching contexts.

### **Theoretical Foundations of CLT**

The theoretical basis of Communicative Language Teaching rests on a fundamental distinction first articulated by Dell Hymes (1972): the difference between linguistic competence — knowledge of grammatical rules — and communicative competence — the ability to use language appropriately in context. Hymes argued that a speaker who knows grammar but cannot navigate social interaction is not truly proficient. This insight reshaped language teaching by establishing that authentic communication, not rule mastery, must be the primary instructional goal.

Building on this foundation, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a multidimensional model of communicative competence consisting of four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This model has profound implications for classroom practice, as it suggests that speaking fluency cannot be developed through grammatical instruction alone. Learners must also be trained in how to adapt their language to different social situations, how to organize extended discourse, and how to deploy communication strategies when faced with gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) further support the CLT framework by demonstrating that language acquisition is most effectively promoted through comprehensible, negotiated interaction — precisely the kind of interaction that CLT activities are designed to generate. When learners engage in meaningful tasks that require them to close information gaps, negotiate meaning, and

modify their output in response to interlocutor feedback, they create the optimal conditions for both fluency and accuracy development.

### **CLT Principles and Their Application to Speaking Fluency**

Several core CLT principles are particularly relevant to the development of speaking fluency. The first is the primacy of meaning over form. In CLT classrooms, the primary criterion for successful communication is whether meaning has been effectively conveyed, not whether every grammatical form has been used correctly. This shift in evaluation criteria has a powerful effect on learner psychology: students who are not penalized for every error speak more frequently, take more risks, and develop oral fluency more rapidly than those who are constrained by fear of making mistakes.

The second principle is the use of information-gap and opinion-gap tasks. These are activities in which learners must communicate with a partner to share information that only one person holds, or to express and defend a personal viewpoint. Because the outcome of the task depends on genuine communication — not on the display of linguistic forms — these activities create authentic communicative pressure that closely mirrors real-life speaking demands. Research by Ellis (2003) consistently demonstrates that task-based activities of this type produce significantly more oral output, greater lexical variety, and higher fluency than teacher-fronted grammar instruction.

The third principle concerns the role of feedback. In CLT, corrective feedback is typically implicit and focused — delivered in ways that acknowledge the communicative intent of the learner's utterance while gently drawing attention to the form that needs revision. Recasting, in which the teacher reformulates the learner's error in correct form without interrupting the flow of communication, has been shown to be particularly effective in promoting both fluency and accuracy without increasing learner anxiety.

Finally, CLT emphasizes the importance of learner autonomy and interaction. Rather than positioning the teacher as the sole source of linguistic knowledge, CLT encourages peer interaction, collaborative tasks, and student-led discussion. This distribution of communicative responsibility across the classroom dramatically increases each learner's speaking time and creates a more naturalistic, socially dynamic environment for oral language development.

### **Practical CLT Strategies for the University ESL Classroom**

The following strategies represent CLT-informed techniques that I have developed and refined through four years of university-level English teaching. Each strategy is grounded in CLT theory and has been adapted to suit the specific needs and challenges of learners in a formal academic context.

The first strategy is structured role-play with real-world scenarios. Students are assigned roles — job interviewer and applicant, doctor and patient, journalist and public figure — and asked to carry out a spoken interaction within that scenario. Unlike unstructured free conversation, structured role-play provides enough contextual support to reduce anxiety while still requiring genuine communicative effort. Pre-task vocabulary preparation ensures that learners have the linguistic resources they need to participate meaningfully.

The second strategy involves debate and opinion-sharing circles. Students are given a controversial but age-appropriate statement and asked to discuss it in small groups, with each group member required to contribute at least twice. This format increases speaking time per student, develops the ability to express and defend opinions, and builds the discourse-level skills — turn-taking, interrupting politely, summarizing others' views — that are essential for fluent spoken interaction.

The third strategy is the use of task-based projects with oral presentation components. Student groups research a topic of their choice, prepare a short presentation, and deliver it to the class. The communicative purpose — informing and persuading an audience — provides authentic motivation for language preparation. Follow-up question-and-answer sessions further develop spontaneous spoken language skills that scripted presentations alone cannot build.

The fourth strategy is podcast-style recording tasks. Students record short audio segments on assigned topics, listen back to their own speech, identify areas for improvement, and re-record. This cyclical process of production, reflection, and revision promotes both fluency and self-awareness — two qualities that are central to sustained speaking improvement. Research by Ducate and Lomicka (2009) has shown that audio recording tasks of this type significantly increase learners' confidence in spoken English over time.

### Classroom Examples

#### Example:

*In a speaking skills course for second-year university students, I introduced a weekly "news discussion" activity in which pairs of students selected a current event, summarized it for their partner, and exchanged opinions. Initially, many students spoke for fewer than thirty seconds before falling silent. After eight weeks of consistent practice, the same students were sustaining turns of two to three minutes, using discourse markers naturally, and asking follow-up questions without prompting. A post-course survey indicated that 78% of participants reported feeling more confident speaking English in public by the end of the semester, compared to only 31% at the start.*

#### Example:

*During a task-based unit on environmental issues, student groups were given different data sets about climate change and asked to present their findings and recommendations to a student panel that then voted on the most persuasive proposal. The competitive element motivated thorough preparation, while the authentic audience created real communicative stakes. Students who had previously been reluctant to speak in class demonstrated notably higher levels of engagement, spontaneity, and lexical range compared to earlier, grammar-focused lessons. Fluency scores on the end-of-unit oral assessment improved by an average of 22% across the class.*

### Challenges and Considerations in CLT Implementation

Despite its well-documented effectiveness, CLT is not without implementation challenges — particularly in formal educational contexts where examinations prioritize written accuracy, class sizes are large, and institutional expectations favor structured, teacher-led instruction. Teachers who wish to introduce CLT must navigate these contextual constraints thoughtfully.

One common concern is the management of large classes during group and pair work. In my experience, this challenge can be addressed through clear task design, explicit role assignment, and teacher circulation — moving continuously through the classroom to monitor progress, provide feedback, and redirect off-task students. The investment of planning time required to design effective CLT tasks is substantial, but the learning outcomes consistently justify that investment.

A second challenge concerns learners who are resistant to speaking activities due to cultural norms around classroom behavior or deep-seated anxiety about making errors in public. For these students, gradual exposure is essential: beginning with pair work, moving to small groups, and only later incorporating whole-class speaking activities allows learners to build confidence incrementally. Creating a classroom culture of mutual respect, where errors are treated as natural and valuable parts of the learning process, is a prerequisite for any successful CLT implementation.

### Conclusion

Communicative Language Teaching offers a principled, research-supported framework for developing speaking fluency in English language learners. By centering instruction on meaningful interaction, authentic communicative tasks, and a supportive classroom environment, CLT addresses the affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of oral language development in ways that more traditional, form-focused methods do not. The strategies outlined in this article — structured role-play, opinion-sharing debates, task-based presentations, and reflective recording tasks — represent practical, classroom-tested tools that any English teacher can adapt and implement.

The evidence from both research and classroom practice is consistent: learners who engage regularly in CLT-informed speaking activities speak more, speak more confidently, and develop greater fluency over time than those who receive only grammar-focused instruction. For university English teachers seeking to make a meaningful and lasting difference in their students' oral proficiency, CLT is not merely one option among many — it is an approach whose effectiveness has been demonstrated repeatedly across diverse learner populations and educational contexts. The challenge for practitioners is not whether to adopt CLT, but how to implement it with the creativity, flexibility, and learner-sensitivity that the method demands.

### Glossary (For Learners)

|                                              |                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)</b> | A language teaching approach that prioritizes meaningful communication and real-life language use over grammatical drilling |
| <b>Speaking Fluency</b>                      | The ability to speak smoothly, naturally, and with minimal pauses or hesitation                                             |

|                                 |                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Communicative Competence</b> | The ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and effectively in social contexts                                      |
| <b>Information-Gap Task</b>     | An activity where learners must communicate to share information that one person holds and the other needs                     |
| <b>Task-Based Learning</b>      | A teaching approach in which students complete real-world communicative tasks as the primary unit of instruction               |
| <b>Recasting</b>                | A form of implicit feedback in which the teacher restates a learner's error in correct form without interrupting communication |
| <b>Learner Autonomy</b>         | The capacity of learners to take responsibility for and direct their own learning process                                      |
| <b>Discourse Competence</b>     | The ability to organize and connect sentences into coherent, meaningful spoken or written texts                                |
| <b>Affective Filter</b>         | A metaphor for the emotional barriers (anxiety, low motivation) that can block language acquisition                            |
| <b>Interaction Hypothesis</b>   | The theory that language acquisition is facilitated through meaningful negotiated interaction between speakers                 |

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