



Authentic Materials for Development of Communicative Competence

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) came into vogue in English language teaching in the late 1960s and by the 1970s revolutionised language teaching. It contested the previous approaches to language teaching aroused by a deep dissatisfaction with earlier approaches. Language teachers and learners were frustrated by the fact that the latter could master the intricacies of grammar and yet were unable to communicate in English. Learning grammar rules and structures allowed mastery on the language but served no communicative purpose. Thus the focus in ELT shifted from viewing language as a system to seeing language as a social phenomenon, from learning grammar to acquiring the ability to use English in social discourses.

Since the goal of teaching English shifted to developing competence in communication, language had to be authentic. Authentic materials help learners learn the language by using the language. Here learning and using a language happen simultaneously unlike the traditional textbook-based method where learning preceded using the language. Authentic texts help the learners master texts from diverse contexts extending to a vast range of discourses. Authentic texts used in CLT, it is believed, helps in developing communicative competence. This paper explores the use of authentic material in the CLT approach to develop communicative competence.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), communicative competence, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), authentic texts, authentic materials

There are two vexatious issues in English Language Teaching (ELT) – the purpose of teaching English and how to go about doing it. This spawns two questions in the field of ELT: ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’ (Harmer, *The Practice* 84-5). The grammar-translation method in English language teaching, in vogue for a long time, concentrated on teaching the structures of grammar and vocabulary (Bussman 483; Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 152; Richards and Schmidt 231; Thornbury 94). The method emphasised memorising and practicing grammar rules and ‘meanings’ of words. Generations of students emerged from English classrooms having mastered the language. They knew all the grammar rules, could solve grammar problems efficiently, and had a fairly decent stock of vocabulary. But, unfortunately, they could not speak English. Many could not even write English efficiently. Generations of language teachers and learners were frustrated by the fact that the latter could master the intricacies of grammar and yet were unable to communicate in English. In other words, the grammar-translation method and rote learning had not contributed in a significant way in helping learners use English to communicate. English language remained a subject but failed to become a useful tool for communication in social contexts. Language learners remained woefully incapable of using English for communicative purposes in real-life situations. The problem lay in the fact that learners developed grammatical competence in the classroom which did not translate into communicative competence outside the classroom (Hall 82; Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 152).

As learning English took a specialised turn towards English for Specific Purposes (ESP) the problem became more acute. Learning grammar rules and structures allowed mastery on the language but served no purpose in situations where English had to be used as a tool of communication, especially in specific discourses. The all-important question was: “can she/he speak English?” A strong need had therefore been felt in the last three decades of the 20th century “to teach languages for purposes of communication” (Byram and Garcia 491). Students from diverse disciplines like business and finance, science and technology, public policy, law, mass communication and media studies, etc. need to use English regularly in their respective fields. It is not sufficient for them to ‘know’ English as a subject. They need to use English for social discourses. In other words, the functional aspect of the language seems to be more important than the formal. Thus a complex matrix of language, society, and culture comes into operation. This entailed a rethinking in the methodology, curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, and materials in ELT.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an approach came into vogue in ELT in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a response to this problem (Richards 9). It revolutionised language teaching. CLT contested the previous methods of language teaching, aroused by a deep dissatisfaction with them. It changed the very approach to teaching English. Thus, as Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers put it in their book *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (1986), “[Linguists] saw the need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures” (64). CLT sent the grammar-translation method into obsolescence because of this. With the advent of CLT the very approach to language teaching took a decisive turn. “The basic common purpose of the changes was clear enough, namely to shift the aims and priorities of language teaching away from the acquisition of well-rehearsed skills in

their own right and towards the confident use of those skills in the attainment of purposes and objectives of importance to the learner in the ‘real world’” (Howatt and Smith 88). Advocates of CLT argue that the primary goal of language teaching is to teach learners language functions, not grammar and vocabulary, and that can be done by “plentiful exposure” to the Target Language (TL) (Harmer, *The Practice* 85).

Linguists advocating CLT argued that knowledge of grammar was not enough as, vitally, the goal of teaching English shifted to developing communicative skills in English. The buzzword then became “communicative competence,” as Dell Hymes put it in his article ‘On communicative competence’ (1972). As Michael Halliday argues in *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (1973), language is as much social as linguistic. Since language was now seen, importantly, as a social entity, the goal of language teaching was clearly set by the CLT approach. The goal set for language teaching was to develop “communication as competence” (Stelma 53). Thus CLT emphasized both ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’ because linguists had definitively settled on the answer to the question ‘why teach’. The purpose and goal then was to develop learner competence in proficiently and effectively using English as a tool of communication in social discourses. The emphasis shifted from the structures of language to its functions. It became important to teach learners “when and how to say what to whom” (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 152).

A study of the CLT approach reveals several important features that drive a learner towards developing communicative competence. As Jack C. Richards and Richard Schmidt say, CLT “seeks to make meaningful communication and language use a focus of all classroom activities” (90). CLT developed, especially by British applied linguists in the 1980s, “as a reaction away from grammar-based approaches such as Situational Language Teaching and the Audiolingual Method” (Richards and Schmidt 90). The basic principles of CLT, as laid down by Richards and Schmidt (90), are:

1. Learners use a language by using it to communicate.
2. Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities.
3. Fluency and accuracy are both important goals in language learning.
4. Communication involves the integration of different language skills.
5. Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.

Larsen-Freeman (41) states the main features of CLT:

1. The primary goal of language teaching is enabling students to use the language to communicate. Communication involves using language functions as well as grammar structures.
2. Language is used in a social context and should be appropriate to setting, topic, and participants.
3. Students should be given an opportunity to negotiate meaning, i.e., to try to make themselves understood.
4. Students should be able to express their opinions and share their ideas and feelings, i.e., learn to communicate by communicating.

CLT thus emphasises the actual ‘use’ of a language for communication in social discourses and not just ‘knowledge’ of the language per se. Whereas accuracy was given sole importance in grammar-based language teaching, CLT posits that fluency must accompany accuracy as two vital components in linguistic communication. CLT for the first time presented the idea that the four basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – along with sub-skills like lexis, spelling, pronunciation, grammar, syntax, meaning, usage, etc. – are together important in communication. Therefore, for effective linguistic communication in real-life situations, all the skills and sub-skills should be taught. CLT also highlighted the importance of integrating the skills as none of them can be mastered and used in isolation. Learners thus were encouraged to use the target language (TL) despite errors. Errors and error correction were felt to be integral to the learning process.

CLT had started to replace Situational Language Teaching in the field of British TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language) in the late 1960s. The nature of language was given close scrutiny and British applied linguists came up with the traditional idea that utterances, spoken and written, carry meaning (Howatt 280). Both Situational Language Teaching (SLT) and Communicative Language Teaching sprang from the theory that language serves the purpose of meaningful utterances. The SLT method taught language structures with activities based on situations. SLT emphasised teaching grammar and lexis through situations and so fell into the morass of formalism. The functional aspect of language was grafted on to the structural aspect of language with greater emphasis on the latter. Thus SLT prioritised teaching the structures of language. But in the late 1960s the very approach of language teaching shifted. CLT replaced SLT bringing about a complete paradigm shift in ELT. CLT prioritised the functional and communicative aspects of language. It redefined the purpose of language teaching. With the shift in purpose, the goal of language teaching changed too. Keeping with the paradigm shift, a complete overhaul of the syllabuses, materials, and classroom activities was also proposed.

CLT is regarded by many applied linguists as an approach and not a method (Richards and Rodgers 66). This area in applied linguistics had properly emerged in the 1970s and was rooted in sociolinguistics. In terms of methodology, the emphasis was placed on message-focus, on the ability to understand and convey messages (Johnson and Johnson 76).

As stated earlier, a key concept in CLT is ‘communicative competence’. According to Hadumod Bussmann:

Communicative competence is the fundamental concept of a pragmalinguistic model of linguistic communication: it refers to the repertoire of know-how that individuals must develop if they are to be able to communicate with one another appropriately in the changing situations and conditions. In this model, speaking is understood as the action of transmitting symbols (i.e. interaction). Communicative competence is the descriptive goal of various social-psychological disciplines (208).

Richards and Schmidt (90-1) point out that communicative competence includes:

- a. *grammatical* competence (also formal competence), that is knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and semantics of a language
- b. *sociolinguistic* competence (also sociocultural competence), that is, knowledge of the relationship between language and its nonlinguistic context, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations, and so forth
- c. *discourse* competence (sometimes considered part of sociolinguistic competence), that is knowing how to begin and end conversations
- d. *strategic* competence, that is, knowledge of communication strategies that can compensate for weakness in other areas.

Communicative competence is, consequently, often conflated with proficiency in language production in real-life situations and is seen as setting a rather unattainable goal of reaching native-speaker level proficiency (Johnson and Johnson 75). Though the original paper of Hymes on communicative competence was not on language teaching, his theory became a model in CLT that influenced several areas in language teaching like syllabus, methodology, materials development, and testing.

The rise of CLT as an approach to language teaching came from two ideas. The first was the criticism of structural linguistics by the American linguist Noam Chomsky. In his book *Syntactic Structures* (1957) Chomsky critiqued linguistic theories in vogue at that time, like structural linguistics, for failing to explain unique and varied utterances. Current linguistic thought concentrated on surface structures of language and so was, according to Chomsky, restricted to explaining structures. Buttressed by such a theory, language teaching adopted methods that at best gave the learners knowledge of the structures of a language. But the functional aspect of language learning was missing. Also, with growing cooperation and interdependence between the European countries, the need to learn major European languages was felt. The need to ‘use’ language for communication was deeply felt (Richards and Rodgers 65).

Consequently, syllabuses were framed to cater to the development of communicative competence for language learners, moving away from the traditional methods of teaching the core concepts of language like grammar and vocabulary. A major applied linguist in this field was D.A. Wilkins whose book *Notional Syllabuses* (1976) became pivotal in framing new syllabuses for CLT.

Following the work of applied linguists in the field of CLT like Wilkins, Widdowson, Christopher Candlin, Christopher Brumfit, Keith Johnson, and other British applied linguists who laid down the theoretical basis for the functional or communicative aspect of language, the CLT approach was rapidly adopted by curriculum developers, syllabus framers, textbook writers, language teachers, and even by governments. Guochen Jin thus defines CLT as: “a set of principles about teaching including recommendations about method and syllabus where the focus is on meaningful communication not structure, use not usage” (Jin 81).

Although a British development, CLT was accepted by American applied linguists. Proponents of CLT on both sides of the Atlantic agreed on two basic features of

the approach: (a) communicative competence was the goal of CLT, and (b) the fundamental aspect of language teaching was seen as teaching the four skills (LSRW) in an integrated way to develop language communication skills (Richards and Rodgers 66). CLT became a unique approach as it eschewed a single model. Neither did it have a single or universally authoritative theoretician nor a single method nor a universally accepted syllabus or textbook. Nevertheless, the single important goal in ELT was clearly defined now: using language meaningfully to facilitate interpersonal communication where language would convey meaning. Emphasis was given to two things at the same time: activating an already existing but dormant knowledge of language for communication, as well as expanding learning through the use of the language. Howatt calls the two the “weak” and “strong” versions of CLT and distinguishes them as “learning to use English” and “using English to learn it” respectively (279). To put it another way, it is “communicating to learn” and “learning to communicate” (Howatt and Smith 91) at the same time.

CLT, therefore, placed applied linguistics in the fields of functions, experiences, and the pragmatics of language use. Concomitant with these new objectives, new ideas of curriculum and syllabus, a new role for teachers, new activity types, and new textbooks and materials were conceptualized. All of these, in vogue till today, facilitate communicative competence without just emphasising grammatical competence. According to Jack Richards (03) the following are the features of communicative competence:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions.
- Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication).
- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations).
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies).

It is clear from Richards’ description that CLT intends to equip the learners to use English in real life, authentic, situations. The syllabus, tasks, and texts have to be appropriate for that goal. It was felt by the advocates of CLT that classroom activities need to cater to real-life situations and so classroom materials cannot be restricted to standard grammar-based textbooks. Communication in authentic situations needs authentic material. Clarke and Silberstein thus argued:

Classroom activities should parallel the “real world” as closely as possible. Since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the message and not the medium. The purposes of reading should be the same in class as they are in real life (51).

Thus Scott Thornbury argues: “With the advent of the communicative approach, inauthentic texts were felt to be inadequate, either as models for language use, or as

preparation for real-life reading and listening. This view was reinforced by the demand for courses designed to teach English for special purposes (ESP)” (21). From their observation of an ESL classroom of immigrants in Canada, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson found that when the teacher implemented the communicative approach in the classroom, she introduced authentic language through a sports newspaper column. Based on this observation therefore the researchers describe “authentic language” as “language as it is used in a real context” (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 158).

Richards states four arguments in favour of using authentic materials to develop communicative competence (20):

- They provide cultural information about the target language.
- They provide exposure to real language.
- They relate more closely to learners’ needs.
- They support a more creative approach to teaching.

There are detractors of authentic texts who prefer contrived texts and argue that such texts are better suited for a set syllabus, are relevant and student-centric, and can also be used authentically. Yet there is a growing tendency in CLT to use authentic texts. The tendency is both to use material authentically and to use actual authentic material. Widdowson clearly states the connection between CLT and the authenticity of texts:

[...] if learners are aiming to communicate naturally, they need to be prepared for this by being involved in natural communicative language use in the classroom. In short, the language of the classroom has to be authentic. The belief here is that the language behaviour of natural use, which is the end of learning, should be replicated as closely as possible in the classroom as this language behaviour will also be conducive to learning, to the means whereby communicative ability is achieved (44).

CLT is as much a process as a purpose associated with the emphasis on structures which facilitate communication (Widdowson 118). And both are believed to be acquired by a learner in the second language classroom through authentic language.

Central to the concept of authenticity is the distinction made by Widdowson between ‘authentic’ and ‘genuine’ in his work *Teaching Language as Communication* (1978). ‘Genuine’ is the language used in real discourses aimed at serving a communicative purpose in a social context, whereas ‘authentic’ is the feature of a language that lends it the element of communication. Judith Buendgens-Kosten points out that,

[The] distinction between features of a text and features of its use by learners has been very influential, even though the use of ‘authenticity’ for both cases has remained common practice in ELT discourse, and texts written by a native speaker, or for native speakers, or for non-language learning purposes tend to continue to be referred to as ‘authentic’ rather than ‘genuine’ (458).

Thus, ‘authentic’ material is the one that is made up of language used in the classroom similar to the language used in real-life settings by native speakers. ‘Authentic’ language and text have therefore come loosely to be identified with real-life language and text respectively, produced for real-life social discourses and not for the classroom.

Proponents of the use of authentic material in language classrooms argue that such materials bridge the gap between real-life language and textbook language as the latter is “a poor representation of the real thing” (Gilmore 99).

Another way of distinguishing between the two types of texts is as ‘authentic’ and ‘contrived’. O’Keefe et al. give a fruitful definition of ‘contrived’ texts: “language that [is] specially made up or invented for the pedagogic purposes of illustrating a particular feature or rule of the language” (26).

Authentic texts have one major advantage: there can be various types of texts a teacher can use in CLT. This is particularly helpful in the text-based instruction which is also called ‘genre-based’ approach. What has to be remembered is, to put it in the words of Richards, “Text here is used in a special sense to refer to structured sequences of language that are used in specific contexts in specific ways” (36).

What makes a material authentic is that it is not created for classroom use but real-life purposes outside of the classroom. Authentic materials are print, video, and audio materials students encounter in their daily lives. They can be radio and television programmes, voice messages, travel brochures, emails, job applications, etc. Authentic materials are broadly classified under the heads ‘Print Materials’ and ‘Auditory Materials’ but can also come under other heads like ‘Audio-Visual Materials’ and ‘Realia’.

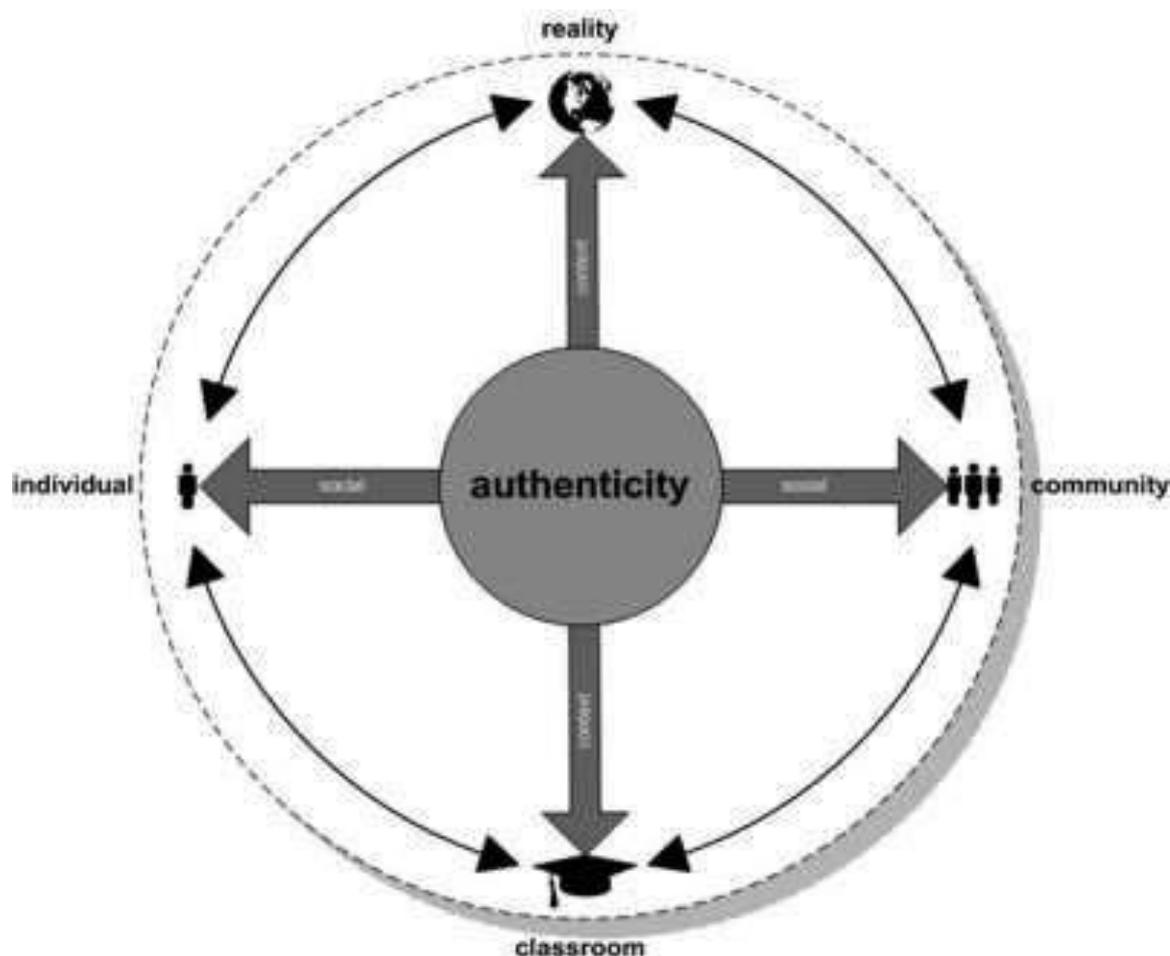
Many writers in the field of ELT have given straightforward definitions of authentic materials. “A classroom text is authentic if it was originally written for a non-classroom audience” (Thornbury 21). Jack Richards and Richard Schmidt define authentic materials as,

materials that were not originally developed for pedagogical purposes, such as the use of magazines, newspapers, advertisements, news reports, or songs. Such materials are often thought to contain more realistic and natural examples of language use than those found in textbooks and other specially developed teaching materials (42).

The use of such material emerges from the concept of authenticity:

[in teaching] the degree to which language teaching materials have the qualities of natural speech or writing. In language teaching a distinction is made between materials that have been specially prepared to illustrate or practice specific teaching points (such as reading passages, listening texts, or model conversations) and those that have been taken from real-world sources. Texts which are taken from newspapers, magazines, etc., and tapes of natural speech taken from ordinary radio or television programmes, etc., are called authentic materials. It is argued that these are preferred classroom resources since they illustrate authentic language use (Richards and Schmidt 42).

A text is therefore authentic if it is used for actual real-life use and not contrived approximations and exemplars. Richard Stephen Pinner recognizes authenticity in the connection between “contextual and social dimensions” and reconceptualizes it as a “continuum” (135). The “continuum” can be explained by the following diagram taken from Pinner (136):



The need for authentic materials was felt with the advent of CLT and Notional/Functional Syllabuses in which emphasis was given on recreating in the classroom “natural language behavior” (Johnson and Johnson 24).

Authentic texts have been advocated because contrived texts for advanced learners often seem comical and inadequate for real-life situations. However, for low-level students, such texts might seem complicated, difficult, and overwhelming as they might contain too many unknown words and complex grammar (Harmer 68). Thus, authentic materials should be used judiciously and it is advisable to use it for advanced-level learners like learners in ESP situations. After all, one definition of authentic texts is that it is language produced by and for the consumption of native speakers of English. Therefore Charlene Polio says, “[I] assum[e] that most teachers find it easier to use authentic materials with advanced students ...” (1). However, authentic materials can be used with lower-level learners, even beginners. Authentic texts for beginners could be children’s books and translated materials (Polio 3).

Also, especially in ESP, authentic materials and tasks are to be used through Needs Analysis. Texts and tasks suited for one type of class may not suit another. Texts and tasks will also differ between beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. Classroom activities need to be content-driven and so the age of the learners should also determine the choice of texts. After all, the fundamental aspect of authenticity is ‘exposure’ to real-life language as is generally used by native speakers of English. The authenticity of texts

thus makes CLT an approach that is less pedantic and pedagogical and more communicative than the textbook method.

CLT is geared towards the use of language in a social setting. Authentic materials expose the learners to the language used in social settings. That is why authentic materials are pivotal in CLT. Authentic materials expose the learners to real discourses and, if carefully chosen, can have educational value. It can lead to content-driven language learning which is suitable in ESP. Moving away from traditional contrived textbooks, authentic texts expose the learners to incidental and informal as well as formal English, a combination that traditional textbooks generally do not contain. Changes and local and regional variations of language can be impressed upon the learners through authentic texts.

Many language teachers and language scholars point out the vital aspect of culture that is embedded in the authentic material-driven approach. Ferit Kilickaya says:

As all we know, knowing a language goes beyond the knowledge of grammatical rules, vocabulary items and pronunciation of these items. Successful language learning requires language users to know that culture underlying language in order to get the meaning across (3).

The use of authentic material is advocated because by using such materials classroom activities get driven by cultural content which acts as a learner motivation (McKay 7). According to Stuart and Nocon, “Learning about the lived culture of actual target language speakers as well as about one’s own culture requires tools that assist language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural texts in which linguistic codes are used” (432). Cultural content-driven material gives the foreign language learner the exposure to the language as is used in daily life by native speakers that the foreign language learner lacks (Shanahan 168).

However, there are disadvantages of using authentic texts. They can be culturally biased making them incomprehensible for many learners. As stated earlier, too many, and complex, structures could be mixed up which can put lower-level learners in considerable difficulty. Listening materials can have incomprehensible accents. Materials can become outdated or worn out. Therefore a careful selection of materials has to be made. Also, often it is the tasks the teacher gives that make the difference. So tasks must adhere to the nature of authenticity.

Classroom activities have to simulate real-life situations and so “the new approach made considerable use of activities like role-playing, improvisation, simulation, and cooperative problem-solving or task-based work, an activity that proved remarkably versatile in a language learning context” (Howatt and Smith 90-1). Authentic materials are introduced in CLT to foster the four basic skills (LSRW) along with the sub-skills, and to teach all the skills in an integrated manner. A functional syllabus is proposed to teach learners to perform functions in English like expressing likes and dislikes, apologise and thank, explain and describe etc. Vocabulary and grammar can be chosen based on the specific functions. A notional syllabus is built on the content and notions a learner uses in her utterances (Richards 11). Incorporating all the functions, notions, situations, tasks, grammar, vocabulary, and topics that learners need, a syllabus was proposed that would take the L2 learner to the threshold of proficiency in communication. This is called the

“Threshold Syllabus” by J. Van Ek and L.G. Alexander in their book *Threshold Level English* (1980). CLT and the Threshold Syllabus are fruitful in ESP classes as learners are taught how to negotiate real-life situations through simulation of real-life situations in the classroom.

Using Threshold Syllabus along with authentic materials within the CLT approach has a future orientation in practical employment-centered training and high-level university academic work (EAP). Authentic materials lead to authentic output, that is, “freer and natural interaction” which serves the “communication of message” and in which there is the full range of language the learners know (Scrivener 113). Thus, it is proposed that CLT as an approach in English language teaching be implemented with sufficient exposure for learners to the language. And this can be achieved through copious use of authentic materials in the classroom. Communicative Language Teaching approach and authentic materials can serve the purpose of developing the communicative competence of language learners.

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