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## Classroom Activities that Best Facilitate Learning

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**Abstract:** Teaching and classroom materials today consequently make use of a wide variety of small-group activities.

Since the language classroom is intended as a preparation for survival in the real world and since real communication is a defining characteristic of CLT, an issue which soon emerged was the relationship between classroom activities and real life. Some argued that classroom activities should as far as possible mirror the real world and use real world or “authentic” sources as the basis for classroom learning. Clarke and Silberstein (1977, 51) thus argued:

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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. Arguments in favor of the use of authentic materials include:

- 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.

Others (e.g., Widdowson 1987) argued that it is not important if classroom materials themselves are derived from authentic texts and other forms of input, as long as the learning processes they facilitated were authentic. Critics of the case for authentic materials point out that:

- Created materials can also be motivating for learners.
- Created materials may be superior to authentic materials because they are generally built around a graded syllabus.

Authentic materials often contain difficult and irrelevant language. Using authentic materials is a burden for teachers. However, since the advent of CLT, textbooks and other teaching materials have taken on a much more “authentic” look; reading passages are designed to look like magazine articles (if they are not in fact adapted from magazine articles) and textbooks are designed to a similar standard of production as real world sources such as popular magazines.

Product of learning, the ultimate goal of learning is to be able to use the new language both accurately and fluently. Learners develop their own routes to language learning, progress at different rates, and have different needs and motivations for language learning. Successful language learning involves the use of effective learning and communication strategies. The

role of the teacher in the language classroom is that of a facilitator, who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning. The classroom is a community where learners learn through collaboration and sharing.

Current approaches to methodology draw on earlier traditions in communicative language teaching and continue to make reference to some extent to traditional approaches. Thus classroom activities typically have some of the following characteristics:

- They seek to develop students' communicative competence through linking grammatical development to the ability to communicate. Hence, grammar is not taught in isolation but often arises out of a communicative task, thus creating a need for specific items of grammar. Students might carry out a task and then reflect on some of the linguistic characteristics of their performance.
- They create the need for communication, interaction, and negotiation of meaning through the use of activities such as problem solving, information sharing, and role play.
- They provide opportunities for both inductive as well as deductive learning of grammar.
- They make use of content that connects to students' lives and interests.
- They allow students to personalize learning by applying what they have learned to their own lives.

Classroom materials typically make use of authentic texts to create interest and to provide valid models of language.

Approaches to language teaching today seek to capture the rich view of language and language learning assumed by a communicative view of language.

Jacobs and Farrell (2003) see the shift toward CLT as marking a paradigm shift

in our thinking about teachers, learning, and teaching. They identify key components of this shift as follows:

1. Focusing greater attention on the role of learners rather than the external stimuli learners are receiving from their environment. Thus, the center of attention shifts from the teacher to the student. This shift is generally known as the move from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction.
2. Focusing greater attention on the learning process rather than the products that learners produce. This shift is known as the move from product-oriented to process-oriented instruction.
3. Focusing greater attention on the social nature of learning rather than on students as separate, decontextualized individuals
4. Focusing greater attention on diversity among learners and viewing these difference not as impediments to learning but as resources to be recognized, catered to, and appreciated. This shift is known as the study of individual differences.
5. In research and theory-building, focusing greater attention on the views of those internal to the classroom rather than solely valuing the views of those who come from outside to study classrooms, investigate and evaluate what goes on there, and engage in theorizing about it. This shift is associated with such innovations as qualitative research, which highlights the subjective and affective, the participants' insider views, and the uniqueness of each context.

6. Along with this emphasis on context comes the idea of connecting the school with the world beyond as means of promoting holistic learning.
7. Helping students to understand the purpose of learning and develop their own purpose
8. A whole-to-part orientation instead of a part-to-whole approach. This involves such approaches as beginning with meaningful whole text and then helping students understand the various features that enable texts to function, e.g., the choice of words and the text's organizational structure.
9. An emphasis on the importance of meaning rather than drills and other forms of rote learning
10. A view of learning as a lifelong process rather than something done to prepare students for an exam Jacobs and Farrell suggest that the CLT paradigm shift outlined above has led to eight major changes in approaches to language teaching. These changes are:
  - 1) Learner autonomy: Giving learners greater choice over their own learning, both in terms of the content of learning as well as processes they might employ. The use of small groups is one example of this, as well as the use of self-assessment.
  - 2) The social nature of learning: Learning is not an individual, private activity, but a social one that depends upon interaction with others. The movement known as cooperative learning reflects this viewpoint.
  - 3) Curricular integration: The connection between different strands of the curriculum is emphasized, so that English is not seen as a stand-alone subject but is linked to other subjects in the curriculum. Text-based learning (see below) reflects this approach, and seeks to develop fluency in text types that can be used across the curriculum. Project work in language teaching also requires students to explore issues outside of the language classroom.
  - 4) Focus on meaning: Meaning is viewed as the driving force of learning. Content-based teaching reflects this view and seeks to make the exploration of meaning through content the core of language learning activities (see Chapter 5).
  - 5) Diversity: Learners learn in different ways and have different strengths. Teaching needs to take these differences into account rather than try to force students into a single mold. In language teaching, this has led to an emphasis on developing students' use and awareness of learning strategies.
  - 6) Thinking skills: Language should serve as a means of developing higher- order thinking skills, also known as critical and creative thinking. In language teaching, this means that students do not learn language for its own sake but in order to develop and apply their thinking skills in situations that go beyond the language classroom.
  - 7) Alternative assessment: New forms of assessment are needed to replace traditional multiple-choice and other items that test lower-order skills.

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