Essentials for Successful English Language Teaching

Thomas S. C. Farrell and George M. Jacobs

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Preface

Education is meant to open magical doors to students, offer exciting, fulfilling careers for teachers, and help create a world in which people work together for the common good. The possibilities are great. Students have so much to learn and so many ways to learn it. Similarly, we teachers have so much to learn about what we teach and the fascinatingly complex paths to facilitating student learning. **Essentials for Successful English Language Teaching** is about how we teach second language (mostly English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)) and how our second language students learn. "There's nothing as practical as a good theory" (Kurt Lewin, 1951, p. 169) probably best sums up how we arranged the contents of this book (see also Chapter 10) as we think it is a practical approach to teaching second language yet, all the activities are backed up solidly with clearly explained theories about where they came from.

Essentials for Successful English Language Teaching is about helping second language teachers maintain and rediscover the reasons that led them to take up teaching, reasons such as sharing their love of learning, making the world a better place, and working together with students and colleagues toward common goals. We strongly believe that the ideas in this book can create excitement, joy, and satisfaction among second language teachers and their students. What we maintain is that the ideas we've gathered and attempt to illuminate in this book bring with them the hope of many days in which an inner smile tells us teachers that, yes, we made the right choice when we chose this profession. **Essentials for Successful English Language Teaching** takes a 'big picture' view of second language learning and teaching. The eight essentials presented in this book are interwoven with each other, so that they are best implemented as a whole, rather than one at a time. Each supports the other; each is best understood as a big picture, rather than as individual puzzle pieces. Chapter 1 outlines in detail what the book is about and what is included in each chapter.

How to use this book

This book consists of ten chapters, eight of which detail all essentials plus the introduction and final chapters that offer final reflections on the use of the

essentials. The eight chapters that look in detail at each of these eight essentials start from Chapter 2 and end at Chapter 9. The parts of each of these eight essentials in these chapters include the following:

- A brief story in each chapter that places the chapter's theme in a real-life context
- A short explanation of the basics of the chapter's theme. This also includes the theoretical foundations of the concept – theories and theoreticians whose works are often cited
- Classroom implications – the activities and learning environment that are congruent with the chapter theme. This is the main section in each chapter.
- Roles of teachers
- Roles of students
- Conclusion
- Reflections of each chapter that include questions and tasks

Writing this book has brought us (the two authors) a better understanding of why these eight essentials in second language education are, indeed, essential, and this has given us a great sense of urgency about seeing them implemented within the communicative language teaching approach to second language education. We hope that you our readers will carefully consider the ideas we present and that you will then form your own opinions and take your own paths, along with colleagues, students, and other voyagers, on the wide, wondrous, and sometimes wild journey that is second language education.

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Chapter Outline

Introduction

Since the 1970s communicative language teaching has been one of the most popular teaching methodologies around the world in second language education. Before that, the more traditional teaching methods (e.g., Audio-Lingual Method; Grammar-Translation Method) that were employed focused more on

producing accurate, grammatically correct target language. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) however began to change the emphasis to where learners produce the language with a focus on fluency and where errors are seen as being a part of development. In traditional classes, teachers were seen as the knowledge providers and sole controllers of the class. In the approach English language teachers share this control and "facilitate" learning rather than dispense knowledge. So CLT represents a major change and is considered one of the main approaches to second language education today (Richards, 2005). Jacobs and Farrell (2001, 2003) label this major change in teaching and learning a second language a *paradigm shift* because in order to successfully implement the CLT approach we must shift our thinking about teachers, students, learning, and teaching a second language. The idea of the shift in focus is illustrated by the story of the "Cricket and the Coin."

One pleasant summer day at lunch time two colleagues, A and B, were walking along a busy street in Atlanta when A turned to B and said, "Do you hear that cricket across the street?" to which B replied, "How could I possibly hear a cricket with all this traffic." Her colleague confidently said, "Let's cross the street and I'll show you." They carefully made their way through the traffic to a flower box on the other side where, sure enough, there was a cricket. B was astounded. "How could you hear a little cricket amid all this noise? You must have super-human hearing!" "The key," A explained, "is not how well we hear but what we listen for." To illustrate, she took a coin from her purse, threw it in the air, and let it drop on the sidewalk. Soon, the sound of braking vehicles filled the air, as cars came to a halt. Drivers and pedestrians turned to look for the rattling coin. As A reached to retrieve her coin, B smiled and said, "Now, I see what you mean; it's all a matter of focus."

This chapter outlines and describes eight essentials of second language education that fit with the CLT paradigm shift. The subsequent eight chapters of this book then focus on one of the eight essentials and the final chapter concludes the discussion. These eight essentials are: encourage Learner Autonomy, emphasize the Social Nature of Learning, develop Curricular Integration, Focus on Meaning, celebrate Diversity, expand Thinking Skills, utilize Alternative Assessment methods, and promote English language Teachers as Co-learners. We argue that in second language education, although the CLT paradigm shift was initiated many years ago, it really has been only partially implemented. Two reasons for this partial implementation are: (1) by trying to understand each essential separately, second language educators have weakened their understanding by missing the larger picture; and (2) by trying

to implement each essential separately, second language educators have made the difficult task of shift or change even more challenging. We now give a brief orientation to CLT and how we should really understand and implement it as a real paradigm shift.

Communicative language teaching

CLT can be seen as a set of "principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the class-room" (Richards, 2005, p. 1). CLT has been the "in" approach to second language education since its beginning in the early 1970s, and has now become the driving force that affects the planning, implementation, and evaluation of English Language Teaching (ELT) throughout the world (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). That said, not many English language teachers or second language educators are in agreement or even clear in their own minds as to what exactly CLT is, and there exist as many diverse interpretations as there are language teachers and second language educators. This wide variation in implementation of CLT is not, as we discuss in the chapter on celebrating Diversity, necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it is a natural product of the range of contexts in which second language learning takes place and the range of experiences that students, teachers, and other stakeholders bring with them.

In its early inception CLT was seen as an approach to teaching English as a second or foreign language for the purposes of enabling second language learners to be able to use language functionally, meaningfully and appropriately, instead of the previous emphasis on correctness (e.g., Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). However, over the years ESL and EFL teachers have interpreted a CLT approach to language teaching in many different ways with many thinking that the teacher just forms groups in their classes and let the students practice speaking the second language. The end result that teachers using this approach were seeking was that their students become competent in speaking that second language. Richards (2005) calls this *phase 1* of the CLT movement and he says it continued until the late 1960s. In phase 1 the previous traditional approaches that gave priority to grammatical competence as a foundation for language proficiency gave way to functional and skill-based teaching that had a "fluency over accuracy" pedagogical purpose. The next phase of CLT according to Richards (2005) was the classic CLT period from the 1970s to the 1990s.

In this phase, the place of grammar in instruction was questioned because it seemed to result only in grammatical competence that produced grammatically correct sentences under controlled conditions but did not, according to many, improve oral production or aid the communicative use of language. So what was really called for at that time was communicative competence where students could actually communicate orally in the second language; for example, Hymes (1972) suggested that Chomsky's ideal native speaker with linguistic competence include the sociolinguistic component of communicative competence of *knowledge of* and *ability for* language use with respect to four factors: "possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and accepted usage" (p. 19). More recently, Richards (2005, p. 1) suggests that communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- 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).

Since the 1990s CLT has continued to evolve by drawing from different educational paradigms and diverse sources with the result that as Richards (2005, p. 24) maintains, there is still "no single or agreed upon set of practices that characterize current communicative language teaching." Rather, he suggests that communicative language teaching these days refers to "a set of generally agreed upon principles that can be applied in different ways, depending on the teaching context, the age of the learners, their level, their learning goals." In addition, Brown (2000) has maintained that CLT should include the following:

- Classroom goals are focused on all the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.
- Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes.
- Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques.
- In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. (p. 266)

Richards (2005) maintains that if we ask ESL/EFL teachers today who say they follow the CLT approach what exactly they do, or what they mean by "communicative," their explanations will vary widely, from an absence of grammar in a conversation course, to a focus on open-ended discussion activities. In our view, the key problem lies in the fact that not enough teachers are implementing CLT and some of those who do implement it have done so too infrequently, too often returning to the traditional paradigm. Later in this chapter, we examine reasons for this.

Understanding communicative language teaching

In second language education, the CLT paradigm shift over the past 40 years, which Long (1997) likens to a revolution, flows from the positivism to post-positivism shift in science (see also Chapter 10) and involves a move away from the tenets of behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics and toward cognitive, and later, socio-cognitive psychology and more contextualized, meaning-based views of language. Key components on this shift concern:

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 or learning-centered instruction.
2. Focusing greater attention on the learning process rather than on the products that learners produce. This shift is known as a move from product-oriented instruction 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 differences 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 a means of promoting holistic learning.
7. Helping students understand the purpose of learning and developing their own purposes.
8. A whole-to-part orientation instead of a part-to-whole approach. This involves such approaches as beginning with meaningful whole texts and then helping students understand the various features that enable the 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 life-long process rather than something done to prepare for an exam.

As mentioned earlier, the CLT paradigm shift in second language education is part of a larger shift that affected many other fields (See Voght, 2000 for a discussion of parallels between paradigm shifts in foreign language education at U.S. universities and paradigm shifts in education programs in business and other professions). Oprandy (1999) links trends in second language education with those in the field of city planning. He likens behaviorism's top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to education to a similar trend in city planning in which outside experts designed for uniformity and attempted to do away with Diversity. In response, a new paradigm arose in city planning, a bottom-up one that sought to zone for Diversity. Describing the current paradigm in second language education, Oprandy writes:

> The communicative approach requires a complexity in terms of planning and a tolerance for messiness and ambiguity as teachers analyze students' needs and design meaningful tasks to meet those needs. The pat solutions and deductive stances of audiolingual materials and pedagogy, like the grammar-translation texts and syllabi preceding them, are no longer seen as sensitive to students' needs and interests. Nor are they viewed as respectful of students' intelligence to figure things out inductively through engaging problem-solving and communicative tasks. (p. 44)

Another parallel that Oprandy draws between new ideas in city planning and new ideas in second language education have to do with the role of the subjective. In city planning, attention began to focus on people's need for a sense of security and belonging in people-centered cities. These concerns, as Oprandy suggests, are matched in second language education by the desire to

facilitate an atmosphere in which students are willing to take risks, to admit mistakes, and to help one another.

Implementing communicative language teaching

The CLT paradigm shift in second language education outlined above has led to many suggested changes in how English as a second/foreign language teaching is conducted and conceived (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Our objective in writing this book is to argue that the CLT paradigm shift has not been implemented as widely or as successfully as it might have been because English language educators and other stakeholders have tried to understand and implement the shift in a piecemeal rather than a holistic manner. Thus, we suggest that English as a second/foreign language educators consider eight major changes associated with this shift because of the impact they already have had on the language education field and for the potential impact they could have if they were used in a more integrated fashion.

We selected these eight because we see them as essential, still in progress, and interlinked with one another. By helping to promote the understanding and use of these eight elements, we hope this book will provide teachers with a handy, user-friendly resource. Certainly, other related elements of good learning and teaching also deserve attention.

First, we briefly explain each essential (we later devote a whole chapter to each essential), explore links between the essential and the larger paradigm shift and look at various second language classroom implications and then we devote an individual chapter to each essential. These eight essentials are:

1. Encourage Learner Autonomy
2. Emphasize Social Nature of Learning
3. Develop Curricular Integration
4. Focus on Meaning
5. Celebrate Diversity
6. Expand Thinking Skills
7. Utilize Alternative Assessment Methods
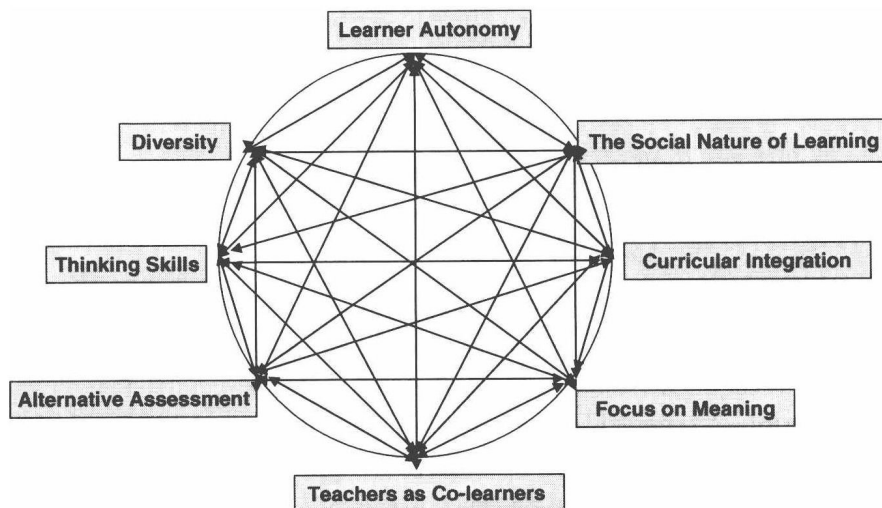8. Promote English Language Teachers as Co-learners.

Figure 1.1 Eight essentials for successful second language teaching

Figure 1.1 provides an illustration of the interdependence of these eight essentials of the paradigm shift in second language education. The circular nature of the figure emphasizes that all the changes are parts of a whole and that the successful implementation of one is dependent on the successful implementation of others.

This book focuses on these eight essentials in second language education, the links between the eight, and, most importantly, how these essentials are being used and can be implemented. We hope this book contributes in some small way to encouraging fuller development of these and related essentials. The eight essentials are briefly explained as follows.

Learner autonomy

Within a CLT approach to second language education we focus more on the role of learners rather than the external stimuli learners receive from their environment, such as from teachers and materials. In other words, the center of attention in learning English as a second/foreign language has shifted from the teacher and materials (the external) to the student (the internal). This shift is generally known as the move from teacher-centered instruction to learner (or student)-centered instruction. Learner Autonomy is a key concept here: learners have an important share of the responsibility for and control over their own learning. Chapter 2 outlines this first essential in CLT in more detail.

The social nature of learning

As the name suggests, to be social in learning we mean some form of inter-action and cooperation is necessary within a CLT approach to second language education. We focus greater attention on the Social Nature of Learning English as a second/foreign language rather than on students as separate, decontextualized individuals. To understand and promote learning, we look not only at individuals but also at the people who make up their world and the connections between them. These people include not only teachers but also peers and others such as administrators and people in the outside community. Cooperation is valued over competition without excluding the latter completely. When students collaborate they all play leadership roles. Chapter 3 outlines this essential in CLT in more detail.

Curricular integration

Curricular Integration refers to a second language pedagogical approach which fuses knowledge from different disciplines to create more meaningful contexts for overall learning. The traditional fragmentation of content by disciplines assumes that students will recognize the links between the disciplines on their own, but this can be difficult for second language students whose main focus may be the language rather than the content. However, with a CLT approach to teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language the integrated approach purposefully and systematically guides second language students toward discovering these connections and processes; connections and proc-esses that help ESL/EFL students better understand themselves and the world around them. In the highest form, this student-centered approach uses real-life issues and varied resources to bring students as close to the "real thing" as possible. Furthermore, integration can also include integrating the various language skills, as well as integrating the academic with the social and emotional. Chapter 4 outlines this essential in CLT in more detail.

Focus on meaning

For this essential we focus on learning English as a second/foreign language for purposes other than just passing an exam. Education is not just preparation for life; it is also participation in life. Students understand the purposes of learning and develop their own purposes for learning regardless of the subject. Within learning English as a second/foreign language we suggest that