



Constructing Meaning in Communicative
Language Teaching : Theory into Practice

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Constructing Meaning in Communicative Language Teaching

—Theory into Practice—

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In this presentation, I will report on a pedagogy class designed to help student teachers enhance their awareness of how to construct meaning of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) so as to enable them to devise meaningful CLT activities in their future classrooms.

Many publications on CLT emphasize the importance of negotiation of meaning and its purposefulness in CLT activities in order to foster learners' communicative competence. Yet, only a handful of studies have ever probed into how interlocutors construct the meaning of what they negotiate. Real learning does not result from getting to know the facts in simplistic interactions, but it must actively engage learners in constructing the meaning in the process.

We cannot learn how to use a mobile phone by simply reading the manual because we cannot see how each instruction fits into a pattern, or stated differently, we cannot grasp the whole picture by reading the manual. In the same vein, student teachers must have experience of constructing the meaning of the assumptions that underlie CLT. Gestalt psychologists say that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and if this explanation is applied to teacher education, no matter how good the explanation of CLT is and no matter how many pieces of knowledge about CLT student teachers pile up, they cannot put them into practice unless they themselves learn experientially how to apply the meaning of the assumptions on which CLT are based.

How, then, can this thinking be made part of my teaching? In a TEFL methodology class, I shared my beliefs about how to construct the meaning when introducing content-based instruction and task-based instruction. The vehicle I chose was an exercise on intercultural communication and conflict management in which students are required to make skits in pairs to explain the conflict and their view of managing the incident. In this way, student teachers first examined an intercultural conflict, and then by grasping the meaning of the situation, they voice in their own words and emotions their solutions, describing the meaning they have constructed.

During these student activities, I refrain from explaining as much as possible, reflecting my own belief that explanation does not necessarily lead to student learning. I will use a DVD recording in the presentation so that the audience will be able to share my class.