Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Dr.Piku Chowdhury

Situational Language Teaching represented the major British approach to teaching English as a foreign language till the 1960s and 1970s. In this approach English was taught by practicing the basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities. Howatt(1984) points out that its function of "predicting language on the basis of situational events" was increasingly being questioned(p.280). Dendrinos(1992) argued that predicting which language the students would need to use in specific situations, all different from each other, was virtually impossible. Besides, several disparate developments in both Europe and the United States brought the theoretical assumptions underlying the Situational Language Teaching under scanner. The advent of the European Common Market leading to considerable European migration gave rise to the necessary corollary of a large population of people migrating for professional reasons and experiencing the urgent need to learn a foreign language for work. As a result the school curriculum was modernized and the seventies saw a large number of secondary schools offering foreign languages to the students. The British applied linguists questioned the usefulness of Situational Language Teaching. Howatt (1984) in his *A History of English Language Teaching*, asserted –

> By the end of the sixties it was clear that the situational approach had run its course. There was no future in continuing to pursue the chimera of predicting language on the basis of situational events. What was required was a closer study of the language itself and a return to the traditional concept that the utterances carried meaning in themselves and express the meanings and intentions of the speakers and writers who created them. (p.280)

Eminent American linguist Noam Chomsky, in his book *Syntactic Structures* (1957) pointed out that structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristic of language, like the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. The functional and communicative potential of language was highlighted. Eminent British applied linguists like Christopher Candlin, Henry Widdowson and functional linguists like John Firth, Halliday, American socio-linguists like Dell Hymes, John Gumperz and William Labov emphasized the need to focus on communicative proficiency and not on mere mastery of structure in language teaching.

The different models of communicative competence have been discussed in the previous chapter. We have seen that Dell Hymes, in reaction to Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence of an ideal native speaker, had developed the concept of Communicative Competence that implied that speakers of a language must be able to use the structural elements of a particular language appropriately in different social situations.

Halliday's functional account of language complements Hyme's view of communicative competence, important for CLT, and describes seven basic functions performed by language, that formed a significant basis for designing CLT strategies:

i.   Instrumental function: using language to get things
ii. Regulatory function: using language to control the behaviour of others
iii. Interactional function: using language to interact with others
iv. Personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings
v.   Heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover
vi. Imaginative function: using language to imagine things
vii. Representational function: using language to represent and communicate information

Another eminent linguist Widdowson in his book *Teaching Language as Communication* (1978) too highlighted the communicative acts underlying the ability to use language for different purposes. We have already seen in the previous chapter that Canale and Swain (1980) had advocated four dimensions of communicative competence, namely, grammatical competence, referring to the speaker's grammatical and lexical capacity; socio-linguistic competence, referring to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place; discourse competence, referring to the interpretation of parts of an individual message in terms of their interconnectedness and signifying how a meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text; and strategic competence, referring to the coping strategies used by the participants in a communication to initiate, maintain, repair, terminate or redirect communication.

Now from the above discussion it is evident that some of the characteristic of a communicative view of language are as follows:

i.   language is a system for expression of meaning
ii. the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication
iii. the structure of language reflects its functional and communicative use

iv. the primary units of language are not simply its grammatical and structural elements, but its functional and communicative meanings as reflected in a discourse

It is also evident that according to the communicative approach, emphasis must be put upon the importance of the following:

i. Communication – Activities, that involve real communication, can promote learning

ii. Tasks – Activities, in which language is used to execute meaningful tasks, supports the learning process (Johnson, 1982)

iii. Meaning – Language, that is meaningful and authentic to the learner, encourages learning. Consequently the learning activities are selected on the basis of their capacity to engage the learner in meaningful language uses, rather than mechanical practice of language patterns.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is thus considered as a broad ***approach*** to teaching rather than a method and has a clearly defined set of classroom practices.

Definition: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) then may be defined as a broad approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction as both the means and ultimate goal of study. It is based on the idea that learning a language successfully comes through having to communicate the real meaning, with learners involved in real communication that calls for their natural strategies for language acquisition and enhances their communicative competence.

Features:

CLT is often considered to have certain general features. David Nunan (1991) proffers a comprehensive list of five most important **features** of CLT:

i. It has an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language

ii. CLT introduces authentic texts in to the learning situation

iii. It allows provision of opportunities for the learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself

iv. CLT leads to the enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important elements contributing to classroom learning

v. It attempts to link classroom language learning with all linguistic activities outside the class

Johnson & Johnson in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* (1998) identify five core features of the current applications of communicative methodology:

i. *Appropriateness*: Language use reflects the situations of its use and must be appropriate to that situation depending on the setting, the roles of the participants, and the purpose of the communication, for example. Thus learners may need to be able to use formal as well as casual styles of speaking.

ii. *Message focus*: Learners need to be able to create and understand messages, that is, real meanings. Hence the focus on information sharing and information transfer in CLT activities.

iii. *Psycholinguistic processing*: CLT activities seek to engage learners in the use of cognitive and other processes that are important factors in second language acquisition.

iv. *Risk taking*: Learners are encouraged to make guesses and learn from their errors. By going beyond what they have been taught, they are encouraged to employ a variety of communication strategies.

v. *Free practice*: CLT encourages the use of "holistic practice" involving the simultaneous use of a variety of subskills, rather than practicing individual skills one piece at a time.

Brown(2001) offers the following interrelated characteristics of the communicative language teaching:

i. Classroom goals are focused on all components of communicative competence, namely, grammatical, discourse, functional, socio-linguistic and strategic. Goals are therefore interrelated with both pragmatic and structural aspects of language

ii. Strategies are designed to engage learners in pragmatic, authentic and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. The prime focus is not on organizational linguistic forms, but on those aspects of language that enable the learner to fulfill those purposes.

iii. Fluency and accuracy are considered as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to be given greater importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in the use of language.

iv. Students ultimately have to use the language productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts outside the classroom and the classroom tasks must therefore equip them with necessary skills for communicating in those contexts.

v. Students are provided opportunities to focus on their own learning process through an understanding of their own styles of learning and through the development of appropriate strategies for autonomous learning.

vi. The teacher must play the role of a facilitator and guide and not a superior source of knowledge. Students are encouraged to construct meanings through actual linguistic interactions with others.

Objectives

Piephoin*The Communicative Teaching of English: Principles and An Exercise Typology*(1981), provides the following levels of objectives in communicative language teaching:

i. An integrative and content level objective (language as a means of expression)
ii. Linguistic and instrumental level (language as a semiotic system and an object of learning)
iii. Affective level of interpersonal relationships and conducts (language as a means of expressing values and judgments about oneself and others)
iv. A level of individual learning needs (remedial learning based on error analysis)
v. General educational level of extra-linguistic goals (language learning within the school curriculum)

The above mentioned objectives for CLT reflect that language teaching must reflect particular needs of target learners. These needs may be in the domains of reading, writing, listening and speaking, each of which can be taught with the help of CLT techniques. Any curriculum should then reflect aspects of communicative competence according to the learner's communicative needs and present proficiency level.

Syllabus

There has been extensive discussion and experimentation with the nature of a CLT syllabus. One of the earliest syllabus models was the notional syllabus proposed by Wilkins (1976) that specified semantic-grammatical categories like frequency, motion and location, and the categories of communicative function that the learners need to express. The Council of Europe developed this into a more comprehensive syllabus specifying the objectives of foreign language courses, that is,

i. the situations in which a foreign language may be used typically (e.g., travel, business etc.),

ii. the topics that one may need to talk about (e.g., personal identification, shopping, education etc.),

iii. different functions that call for a communicative use of language (e.g., describing something, expressing agreement or disagreement, asking for information etc.)

iv. concepts or notions used in communication (e.g., time, frequency, duration)

v. the vocabulary and grammar needed for communication

The details were published in *Threshold Level English* (J.A.vanEk& Alexander, 1980)in which a list of what were needed for attaining a reasonable degree of communicative proficiency was specified. This however was criticized by British applied linguists and several new proposals and models for a CLT syllabus evolved. Yalden (1983) classified the different types of communicative syllabus in the following manner:

Type	Reference
(i) structures plus functions	(i) Wilkins (1976)
(ii) functional spiral around a structural core	(ii) Brumfit (1980)
(iii) structural, functional, instrumental	(iii) Allen (1980)
(iv) functional	(iv) Jupp and Hodlin (1975)
(v) notional	(v) Wilkins (1976)
(vi) interactional	(vi) Widdowson (1979)
(vii) task-based	(vii) Prabhu (1983)
(viii) learner-generated	(viii) Candlin (1976), Henner-Stanchina and Riley (1978)

Some communicative syllabuses attempted task-specification and task-organization as important criteria. N.Prabhu (1983) asserted that:

> The only form of syllabus which is compatible with and can support communicational teaching seems to e purely procedural one – which lists, in more or less detail, the types of tasks to be attempted in the classroom and suggests an order of complexity for tasks of the same kind. (p.4)

One of the earliest attempts to organize CLT around specific communicative tasks was the English Language Syllabus in Malaysian Schools (1975). There is considerable debate regarding the effectiveness of the different syllabus models. Some argued that the present accepted forms of CLT syllabus should be abolished since only the learners can be completely aware of their own needs, resources and learning pace. Consequently each learner can create an implicit personal syllabus as a part of English language learning. There are others who preferred the model proposed by Brumfit that posits a grammar based syllabus

around which various concepts, functions and communicative tasks are grouped systematically.

Classroom Activities

Thus the needs of learners in their daily life outside the confines of the class are of paramount importance in CLT. Classroom activities accordingly entails a planned scheme of action that calls for negotiation, co-ordination and co-operation between learners, activities that need fluency in speech and thus enhance the confidence of the learners in the long run, role-plays that enable learners to develop and practice language functions and various activities that focus on grammar and pronunciation. In the nineties the Dogma 95 Manifesto claimed that published materials create obstacles in the communicative approach and thus CLT must focus on real conversations on real issues. Such communication would then become a tool for learning, leading to explanations and further communications.

Classroom activities commonly used in Communicative Language Teaching as advocated by eminent linguists like Savignon (1983) can be summed up as follows:

i.   Role-play
ii. Interviews
iii. Information gap – to be identified and filled up within a conversation
iv. Language games
v.   Language exchanges in various forms
vi. Pair work
vii. Group work
viii. Surveys
ix. Learning by teaching

Finocchiaro and Brumfrit (1983) offer a lesson outline for a typical CLT lesson that suggests that Communicative Language Teaching procedures are evolutionary. The plan is for the function of "making a suggestion" for students of a secondary school programme, for enhancement of communicative competence.

1. Presentation of a brief dialog or several mini-dialogs, preceded by a motivation (relating the dialog situations[s] to the learners' probable community experiences) and a discussion of the function and situation – people, roles, setting, topic, and the

informality or formality of the language which the function and situation demand. (At beginning levels, where all the leaners understand the same native language, the motivation can well be given in their native language.)

2. Oral practice of each utterance of the dialog segment to be presented that day (entire class repetition, half-class, groups, individuals) generally preceded by your model. If min-dialogs are used, engage in similar practice.

3. Questions and answers based on the dialog topic(s) and situation itself. (Inverted *wh* or *or* questions.)

4. Questions and answers related to the students' personal experiences but centered around the dialog theme.

5. Study one of the basic communicative expressions in the dialog or one of the structures which exemplify the function. You will wish to give several additional examples of the communicative use of the expression or structure with familiar vocabulary in unambiguous utterances or mini-dialogs (using pictures, simple real objects, or dramatization) to clarify the meaning of the expression or structure….

6. Learner discovery of generalizations or rules underlying the functional expression or structure. This should include at least four points: its oral and written forms (the elements of which it is composed, e.g., "How about + verb + ing?"); its position in the utterance; its formality or informality in the utterance; and in the case of a structure, its grammatical function or meaning….

7. Oral recognition, interpretative activities (two to five depending on the learning level, the language knowledge of the students, and related factors).

8. Oral production activities – proceeding from guided to freer communication activities.

9. Copying of the dialogs or mini-dialogs or modules if they are not in the class text.

10. Sampling of the written homework assignment, if given.

11. Evaluation of learning (oral only), e.g., "How would you ask your friend to _____? And how would you ask me to _____?". (pp.107-108)

Traditional procedures like those followed in theStructural-Situational and Audio-Lingual principles are reinterpreted and enhanced, as exemplified by orthodox CLT texts like Alexander's *Mainline Beginners*(1978) and *Starting Strategies* by Abbs&Freebairn (1977). The methodological procedures underlying such visions are reflected in a sequence of activities presented by Littlewood in *Communicative Language Teaching* (1981):

Pre-communicative Activities   Structural Activities

Quasi-Communicative Activities

Functional Communicative Activities

Communicative Activities

Social Interaction Activities
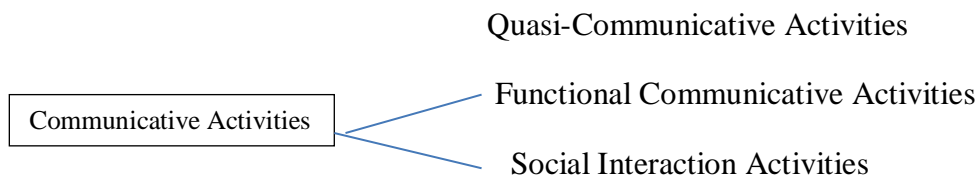
Sauvignon in *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*(1983) rejects the earlier belief that the learners must first gain control over skills like pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary before applying them in any communication, and advocates communicative practice from the very beginning of instruction.

Learner's Role in a Communicative Language Class

CLT conceives of the learner's role as distinct from that in traditional second language classrooms. Breen and Candlin in 'The Essentials of a Communicative Curriculum in Language Teaching' (1980) described the learner's role within CLT as a negotiator between the self, the learning process and the objective of learning:

> The role of as negotiator – between the self, the learning process and the objective of learning – emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the groupand within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. Theimplication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way. (p.110)

There is an indication that in some cases the learners themselves have certain preconceptions which collectively create a "set" for learning. If this set is not realized then it may lead to learner confusion (Henner-Stanchina& Riley, 1978). In some cases of CLT no particular text or grammar rules are presented, classroom arrangements are not standard and students are made to interact more with each other than with the teacher. This type of cooperative approach to learning emphasized in CLT aims at making the learners aware of the fact that any failure in communication is a joint responsibility and not the sole responsibility of the speaker or the listener. Likewise an effective communication is treated as a joint accomplishment.

Teacher's Role in CLT

A teacher is assumed to have multiple roles in Communicative Language Teaching as pointed out by Breen and Candlin (1980):

The teacher has two main roles: the first one is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the variousactivities and text. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. The latter role is closely related to the objective of the first role and arises from it. These roles imply a set of secondary roles for the teacher; first, as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself, second as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities…A third role for the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities. (p.99)

From the above account it is possible to sum up a teacher's role in CLT as that of

(i) a facilitator: A teacher can help in interpersonal communication between the learners and communication between the learners and the text and related activities

(ii) Independent participant in the communication process in the class

(iii)Organizer of resources for effective communication in the class: Use of relevant teaching-learning materials or creation of various suitable situations and environments for effective communication are done by the teacher.

(iv)As a resource himself/herself: The teacher may himself/herself enact various roles and generate specific contexts for initiating, sustaining and enhancing effective communication.

(v) A guide for all the classroom procedures and tasks

(vi)Needs analyst: The teacher can identify and then accordingly analyze the language needs of the individual learners in order to develop suitable CLT strategies.

(vii)   A counselor

(viii)   A Group Process Manager

- *Needs Analyst*

The CLT teacher assumes the responsibility of identifying and responding to the linguistic needs of the students. This may be done in two ways –

i. Informally: personally through one-to-one sessions with the students. The teacher talks about various issues, identifying the student's perception of his or her learning style, resources and learning coals.

ii. Formally: the teacher administers a needs assessment instrument containing items that determines and individual's motivation for studying the language. Usually 5-point scales like those developed by Savignon (1983) are used for the purpose.

On the basis of needs assessment, teachers plan group and individual instructions that satisfy the learners' needs.

- *Counselor*

  The communicative language teacher plays the role of a counselor. He/she acts as an effective communicator trying to maximize the connection between the intentions of the speaker and the listener. The teacher playing the role of the counselor, achieves this by effective use of paraphrasing, frequent confirmation and prompt feedbacks.

- *Group Process Manager*

Effective Communicative Language Teaching necessitates student-centric strategies and the teacher organizes the classroom as a setting suitable for communicative activities. Many such activities have been suggested by linguists like Littlewood(1981),Finocchiaro and Brumfit(1983). In all such class activities the teacher keeps monitoring and encouraging the students and organizes a systematic process. The teacher tries to minimize gaps and errors in grammar or lexis and also takes note of such gaps to comment on and discuss later. At the end of such well organized group activities the teacher discusses the activities in detail and points out various alternatives. He/she helps the groups of learners in self-rectification in the process.

Role of Instructional Materials in CLT

A variety of instructional materials is used to support CLT. Practitioners of CLT consider the instructional materials as crucial for influencing the quality of classroom interaction and use of the language. Three kinds of instructional materials are most widely used today. These are –

i. Text-based instructional materials

ii. task-based instructional materials

iii. realia

❖ Text-based instructional materials: There are a number of text books designed to support Communicative Language Teaching, some of the most popular of these being Morrow & Johnson's *Communicate* (1979), Watcyn-Jones's *Pair Work* (1981) and the various texts written to support the Malaysian *English Language Syllabus* (1975). These are different from traditional structurally organized texts. A typical CLT text-based material consists of the following components:

i. a theme – such as relaying information

ii. a task analysis for thematic development – such as, understanding a message, asking questions to obtain clarification, asking for more information, taking notes, ordering and presenting information.

iii. a practice-situation description – imagining a situation and assigning tasks on the basis of that.

iv. a stimulus presentation

v. comprehension questions

vi. paraphrase exercises

❖ Task-based instructional materials: A variety of language games, role plays, simulations and task-based communicative activities are used for CLT. These are principally in the form of exercise handbooks, cue cards, activity cards, pair-communication practice materials and student-interaction practice booklets. In pair-communication materials typically two sets of materials are provided for a pair of students, each set having different information, which are sometimes complementary, demanding each of the partners to fit his/her respective parts of information into a composite whole. There are other types of task-based materials which provide drills in interactional formats.

❖ Realia: Authentic and real-life materials are often used in the CLT classroom. These include language-based realia, like magazines, advertisements, newspapers, graphic and visual sources and other signs around which communicative activities can be designed.

Educational scenario in Europe changed drastically with the increasing interdependence of European countries that called for a need to teach English according to the practical needs of the increasing number of speakers. In 1971 a group of experts investigated the possibility of developing a system of language teaching in which learning tasks are broken down into

units, each unit corresponding to a component of a learner's needs and is systematically related to other such units. A preliminary document prepared by the British linguist D.A. Wilkins (1972) proposed a functional or communicative definition language that could serve as a basis for developing communicative language teaching curriculum. It was an analysis of the communicative meanings that a language learner needs to understand and express. Wilkins attempted to demonstrate the systematic play of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language. He described two types of meanings, namely,

  i.   notional categories – concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, frequency and
  ii.   categories of communicative function – requests, denials, offers, complaints etc.

Wilkins revised and expanded this document into a book titled *Notional Syllabuses* (1976) which had a significant impact on the development of Communicative Language Teaching. The scope of CLT has expanded since the mid-seventies and both American and British proponents now consider CLT as an approach and not a method. The CLT approach is believed to –

  a.   make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and
  b.   to develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills, viz., reading, writing, speaking and listening that acknowledge the interdependency of language and communication.

Littlewood (1981) states that, "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language." Howatt(1984), in his book *A History of English Language Teaching*, distinguishes between a 'strong' and 'weak' version of CLT:

> There is in a sense, a 'strong' version of the communicative approach and a 'weak' version. The weak version which has become more or less standard practice in the last 10 years traces the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching…The strong version of communicative teaching, on the other hand, advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. If the former could be described as 'learning to use' English, the later entails 'using English to learn it'.(p.278)

Thornbury (1999) points out that the weak version or shallow end approach to CLT is based on the principle that in order to make the learner use the language in n a communicative situation it is necessary first to learn the grammatical rules and then apply them in that particular communicative situation. On the other hand, the deep-end approach or strong version of CLT is based on the belief that grammar is acquired unconsciously during performance or speech in those communicative situations themselves and thus it is not necessary to teach Grammar separately(pp.18-19).

Stephen Krashen and other second language acquisition theorists like Savignon (1983), who profess that language proficiency is developed through the unconscious process of acquisition, emphasize that such a development comes about effectively through a communicative use of language, rather than through practicing language skills. Johnson (1984) and Littlewood (1984) advocated a skill-learning model that emphasized the acquisition of communicative competence in a language as an example of skill development. According to this model acquisition communicative competence involves both cognitive and behavioural aspects and thus constitutes a basis of the development of modern CLT techniques.

Advantages

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes a "task-oriented, student-centered" language teaching practice. It addresses the actual needs of the learners of the use of English language and accordingly simulates a variety of contexts- both utilitarian and emotional, to provide the students with the necessary language skills for a comprehensive use of English language. The primary focus is not only on the language form and grammatical accuracy, but also on the appropriateness of language use, feasibility, communication skills and training of students in communicative and reflective practices. A great emphasis is led upon training learners in effective and appropriate use of their linguistic skills in real life situations.

Specifically, the communicative approach of teaching has the following advantages:

i. The communication between students and teachers is more interactive.
ii. Teaching becomes more student-centric. Students develop the subject, tech initiatives and bear greater responsibility.
iii. The teacher-student relationship is more harmonious

iv. Student abilities are given greater recognition as opposed to traditional classroom teaching of English that emphasized the teacher's central role in dissemination of knowledge.

v. Communicative language teaching emphasizes the learner's cognitive ability and operational capabilities, which allow the students to think independently.

vi. Students are enabled to express their independent views with confidence

vii. Language is taught in close relation to real life communicative situations and thus the students are equipped with linguistic skills to cope better in real life

viii. Students get interest in the language and are motivated. CLT urges the learners to participate in a vast plurality of real life that they can easily relate to and thus an element of enjoyment is added to English language learning.

Disadvantages

i. Although CLT approach ideally attempts enable learners to interact successfully in real life situations, the classroom activities often are somewhat abstract and thus creates difficulties in reproducing truly authentic use of language. Genuine interaction is thus not achieved.

ii. In a very large class, it is difficult to monitor and guide each learner in the CLT approach.

iii. Students with low level of proficiency in the target language find it difficult to participate confidently in communicative activities. Lack of individual care, in most cases, fail to address this problem.

iv. The examination pattern of particular institutions often emphasize grammatical accuracy, and hence communicative fluency becomes irrelevant in such cases.

v. In some cases English in rarely used outside the classroom. In such cases all the situations imagined for communicative tasks in the class fail to generate a sense of relevance among the students.

vi. Some scholars believe that the CLT approach focuses too much on oral or communicative skills at the expense of reading and writing schools.

vii. Accuracy of pronunciation and form are neglected to some extent.

viii.   There is not enough emphasis on the rectification of grammatical errors.

  ix.   There is a dearth of adequately trained teachers for successful implementation of the CLT approach.

   x.   The evaluation system and the curriculum often provide inadequate time for developing organized and well planned materials for communicative classes.

  xi.   Lack of support and insufficient funding often create obstacles.