

Reflections on instructional approaches, methods, and tools

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A Comparison between the Direct Method and CLT

What is the best way to teach English Language Learners? For as long as ELLs have been around to learn a second language, their teachers have differed on how best to teach effectively. While there are many different methods created to address this need, two of the most common world-wide are the Direct Method (DM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The first section of this paper will examine the similarities and differences between these two ways of teaching, focusing specifically on how each deals with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, error correction, and finally how each views the role of the teacher.

The main goal for both the Direct Method and CLT is effective communication. While the intention is the same, the theories on *how* to achieve these results differ. Proponents of DM maintain that the best way to achieve this is for students to learn to think in the L2, while those who practice CLT say students need to become adept with linguistic forms and social nuance, or 'linguistic competence' and 'communicative competence' (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The Direct Method derives its name from the fact that no translation from L1 to L2 is allowed. Instead, meaning must be directly communicated to learners in the target language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). This means that, in terms of vocabulary instruction, visual aids like pictures, realia, and graphic organizers are vital because there is no fallback in L1 for clarification. As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) say, "The teacher should demonstrate, not explain or translate" (p. 29). In CLT visual aids are also highly useful, but "Judicious use of the students' native language is permitted" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 125). In this case "judicious use" means that L1 is permitted as long as the L1 is

facilitating student learning and not acting as a crutch for the teacher. Despite this drastic difference, both DM and CLT support in-context vocabulary words. In the Direct Method students must form complete sentences when communicating because having the context of a complete sentence, rather than a disjointed word list, is believed to be better and “more natural” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 29). CLT takes this belief a step further by encouraging vocabulary to be built around authentic language. This also means that in CLT rote memorization of word lists should not happen. Instead, relevant vocabulary is acquired as students negotiate for meaning by interacting with each other (Burns & Richards, 2012). Though DM and CLT vary in their methodology about how much context is necessary for vocabulary learning (complete sentences versus a complete conversation), CLT and DM both ask that context be included in the process of vocabulary learning. Many studies (Krashen, 1989; Nation, 1990; Rodríguez & Sadowki, 2000) agree that this is essential to long-term memory retention.

Because the main goal for both DM and CLT is communication, grammar is less emphasized than vocabulary. The Direct Method does encourage all four literacy skills at the onset of instruction, but oral communication is the starting point that activities involving reading and writing are based on (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). This use of oral context to guide lessons, rather than grammar structures, is similar to CLT where “language functions might be emphasized over forms” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 124). In CLT grammar is treated like vocabulary learning; the grammar structures learned are guided by situational context (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). *How* grammar is taught in CLT can be either inductive or deductive, depending on what the teacher and students decide is the best

comprehension strategy. Conversely, in the Direct Method “grammar is taught inductively” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 29). Even if generalizing a grammar rule from examples is ineffective for some learners, an explicit rule “may never be given” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 29).

DM and CLT’s view of pronunciation in the classroom is one area that differs, despite the common goal of communication. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) describe pronunciation in the Direct Method as being a priority “right from the beginning of a course” (p. 31).

According to Brinton it is generally taught by repetition and imitation, such as drill-and-practice exercises (Burns & Richards, 2012). However, pronunciation is not such a priority in CLT.

Brinton (2012) writes that there is “little or no overt focus on pronunciation” (p. 247). As long as the mispronunciation of a word doesn’t interfere with the overall meaning, teachers using CLT will ignore mispronunciations. This may stem from the Communicative Language Teaching principle in that the speaker has choices about what and how to say what they mean (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Error correction is another area where the Direct Method and CLT differ. When using the DM, a teacher emphasizes self-correction whenever possible. Possibilities used in DM to foster this self-correction include recasting the error and asking which choice is best, signaling the error by repeating it in a questioning tone, and repeating what the student said right up until the error, giving them a chance to make a correction (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

While error correction using the Direct Method is focused on student self-regulation, error correction in CLT is not common. This is because errors are “seen as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 125). Rather than

immediate error correction with the goal being self-correction, a teacher using CLT is more likely to quietly note errors and address them in a later activity, especially if the purpose of the activity is for fluency.

The teacher's role is also greatly defined by whether they are using the Direct Method or Communicative Language Teaching. A similarity between the two ways of teaching is that both compel the teacher to create authentic situations for students to practice communication. The degree to which this is emphasized is greater in CLT, but encouraging speaking through contextual interaction is important to the role of both (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Teaching about the target language's culture is also important in both, albeit with distinctions. In DM the cultural focus is on the history and geography of natives of the target language while in CLT the focus is on different cultural aspects, such as register and nonverbal cues (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Guiding student learning towards the most appropriate language use (given the social context) and ensuring students are able to successfully exchange meaningful interactions are two of the prime concerns for a CLT teacher. In the Direct Method the teacher's role is less a facilitator and more a director of class activities. This is because DM is teacher-centered (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The role of the teacher in CLT is "less dominant than in a teacher-centered method" (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 122). A good example of this is the difference in error correction. In DM the teacher is expected to correct student mistakes, while in CLT the expectation is not error correction but advice on how students can best negotiate for meaning (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Often this role can be fulfilled through answering students' questions, something that is less common in a teacher-centered classroom.

Finally, the role of assessment also greatly differs. The role of the teacher in the Direct Method is “not to formally evaluate student knowledge, but to encourage functional use of the language from their students” (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 31). While functionality is a positive thing, incorporating only formative assessment in a method seems extreme as compared to CLT, which allows both formative and summative assessment. The role of the teacher in Communicative Language Teaching is to “evaluate students’ accuracy and fluency both informally and formally” (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 125). In order for the objectives and evaluations of CLT to be cohesive, it is important for the teacher to try to present authentic context in the event of a formal evaluation, like using a real newspaper advertisement to test the reading skill.

Upon examining how vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, error correction, and the role of the teacher are treated in the Direct Method and Communicative Language Teaching, it is possible to conclude several things. First of all, DM and CLT are similar in that they both share the general principle that communication is the main purpose of learning a second language. This is apparent in how both focus on vocabulary development and speaking skills over grammar and rote memorization. In both the teacher is expected to encourage communicative speaking, target language culture, and incorporate real-life context whenever possible. However, these two ways of teaching also have great differences. At the core, the Direct Method is more teacher-centered than CLT, which affects how the teacher views error correction and their role in the classroom. Overall, both DM and CLT have been heavily used ways of teaching a second language, implying both are still relevant to teaching today. Deciding which is best will depend greatly on the individual teacher, students, and goals for the

classroom.

Understanding Communicative Competence in CLT

Communicative competence is the knowledge of “knowing when and how to say what to whom” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 115). In other words, it involves knowledge of cultural appropriateness, audience, register, forms, and functions of a language. Before the 1970s linguistic competence, or the structure of language, was the only concern. However, Hymes (1971) noted that knowing the structure of a language doesn’t cover the social aspect of communicating. Therefore, there are two sets of language concerns: Linguistic and Communicative. With the importance of communicative functions like promising, declining, debating, and comparing noted for the first time, communicative competence paved the way for a shift to the Communicative Approach (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Within this approach lies Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), where communication is the general goal. Within this goal we can see both linguistic and communicative competences being essential. For example, students who learn in a CLT setting “need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings, and functions” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 122).

Another key part of how CLT incorporates communicative competence is in free choice. In CLT it is the teacher’s role to instill enough knowledge and strategies about the L2 so that the students can make their own choice about what the appropriate form is, given the social context (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Being able to negotiate for meaning, notice language use, develop language resources, and participate in meaningful social exchanges are all principles that reflect a stress on communicative competence (Burns & Richards, 2012). More recently, communicative competence has been revised to include appropriate cross-

cultural exchanges, or “intercultural communicative competence” (Burns & Richards, 2012). Legutke (2012) explains that as technology continues to bring the diverse people of the world closer together, “the education of the interculturally competent citizen has become a key goal of language learning” (p. 113). Overall, communicative competence is the rules or aspects of a language that are social and interactive, rather than linguistic, and are an important part of language learning.

A Tool for Teaching: SIOP

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or SIOP, was developed over ten years ago. It was created in response to a “need for a comprehensive, well-articulated model of instruction for preparing teachers to work with English learners” (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. xi). It was originally made as a protocol for the Content-Based Approach, though some argue that SIOP works as a framework for planning and delivering instruction in more ways than one (Burns & Richards, 2012). I agree that SIOP implementation can work successfully across contexts, including target language and program model. I think that the value of SIOP is larger than its original intent of being a protocol for just CBI— SIOP can serve as a guide for successful teaching in general.

SIOP falls under the Content-Based Instruction Approach. Both have been frequently researched (Batt, 2010; Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Canges, & Francis, 2011; Guarino et al., 2001). The approach incorporates comprehensible input, Communicative Language Teaching’s opportunities to negotiate for meaning, activities that encourage motivation and natural learning, and emphasizes the importance of teaching learning strategies (Burns & Richards, 2012). CBI is also valuable in that it encourages “appropriate academic language” through

incorporating English language learning into subjects like history, math, and science (Burns & Richards, 2012, p. 151). In an American public school context, CBI is a way for ELLs to keep up with the content standards for their grade while simultaneously learning their new language. However, understanding the rationale for Content-Based Instruction is quite different from knowing how to teach it in a classroom, which was the catalyst for the creation of the SIOP model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

Developed for both elementary and secondary levels, the purpose of SIOP is to be a step-by-step instruction manual for how to teach an academic subject in an L2. The structure of the book contains eight 'components' of the protocol. These components are: 'Lesson Preparation', 'Building Background', 'Comprehensible Input', 'Strategies', 'Interaction', 'Practice/Application', 'Lesson Delivery', and 'Review and Assessment' (Echevarria et al., 2008). These building blocks of SIOP are not unique topics to a specific program model. They are not unique to a particular age level. Most of them are even common in approaches like the Communicative. In fact, things like being prepared for your lesson, connecting what students already know to new things, being understandable, teaching in a variety of ways, letting students practice, paying attention to lesson delivery, measuring student learning are not just components of SIOP, these are components of teaching. While many experienced teachers may do these things instinctually, SIOP is a useful starting point for young teachers in teacher preparation programs.

One of the reasons I think that SIOP is a useful tool for teachers is that it doesn't stop at its components. SIOP shows, it doesn't just tell. Instead of telling the teacher "When teaching ELLs it is important to have good lesson delivery", SIOP explains exactly what "good" means. It

goes so far as to supply the reader with a matrix that specifically states expectations for “good” delivery. For example, the component “lesson delivery” is first broken down into four parts: content objectives, language objectives, student engagement, and pacing. Then each of *these* parts is described on a rubric scale of 1-4. By reading this matrix, I understand that the ideal (4/4 points) for ‘student engagement’ is that my students are “engaged approximately 90% to 100% of the period” (Echevarria et al., 2008, p. 160). In my opinion, consistent detail and examples are two things that make SIOP valuable. In addition, the descriptions are general enough to be able to apply to multiple contexts. For example, no matter what age, proficiency level, or program model I am following, the SIOP ‘students are engaged’ matrix still applies.

In addition to SIOP being written in a way that applies across the board to general teaching practices, it also assists more than just ELL students. First of all, English Language Learners benefit from SIOP in several ways. According to Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm (2011), a common misconception teachers have about ELLs is that exposure to and practice with English is all that’s needed for successful language learning. In reality, exposure and interaction aren’t enough. ELLs also need “guided practice and frequent opportunities to learn a second language in both oral and written modes” (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2011, p. 105). SIOP recognizes the importance of guided practice through their emphasis of comprehensible input and scaffolding strategies. In a list of guidelines for ELLs, Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm (2011) state that new concepts should be introduced by “working from the students’ current knowledge” (p. 108), which is what the ‘Building Background’ component of SIOP explains how to do. By following the SIOP protocol, an ELL student has a good chance of having these needs addressed. However, ELLs are not the only students who can benefit from support for learning and building

background. In my experience, these techniques can help students with learning disabilities and students who are weak in the target subject because the SIOP components are designed to scaffold instruction and comprehensible input for the whole class.

However, some researchers (Krashen, 2013) argue that scaffolding and creating comprehensible input reflect two “fundamentally different views about how language is acquired” (p. 11). The views referred to are the Skill-Building Hypothesis and the Comprehension Hypothesis. Krashen (2013) describes the Skill-Building Hypothesis as assuming:

that students first need to consciously learn their "skills" (grammar, vocabulary, spelling), and that only after skills are mastered can they actually use these skills in real situations; they are made “automatic” as students use them in writing and speaking, and students can fine-tune their rules when they are corrected. Skill-Building thus depends on conscious learning, output, and correction. (p. 11)

In contrast, the Comprehension Hypothesis argues that the only way to acquire language and develop literacy is “when we understand what we hear and what we read” (Krashen, 2013, p. 11). According to Krashen (2013), this is direct opposition to the Skill-Building Hypothesis because language acquisition is not acquired during speech or writing production, nor through memorizing grammar rules or vocabulary lists. Krashen (2013) argues for the Comprehension Hypothesis, stating that language acquisition is subconscious. He further states that the SIOP model is “a mixed bag” because “SIOP ignores this struggle” between two drastically different language acquisition hypotheses and “simply accepts both as valid” (Krashen, 2013, p. 11). Krashen (2013) disagrees that anything other than the Comprehension Hypothesis is correct

and that by incorporating another hypothesis it “should produce profound skepticism” about SIOP (Krashen, 2013, p. 20). However, another way to view SIOP’s ignoring of language acquisition theories could be that the protocol may have found a way to marry the two together. After all, Krashen (2013) found that “five SIOP items out of 30 are consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis. Another six are consistent with the Skill-Building Hypothesis” (p. 20). Further studies investigating this current debate about SIOP may be required.

Ultimately, a teacher should be guided by current research (Batt, 2010; Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Canges, & Francis, 2011; Krashen, 2013), in addition to the standards and content objectives of their institution in order to determine whether SIOP is a useful tool. However, parts of SIOP can be easily adapted to fit many kinds of teaching methods. SIOP’s emphasis on clear sets of content and language objectives is something that all teachers should do, regardless of program model. Using the SIOP grading matrices as a guide for how to build background, deliver comprehensible input, and teach with effective strategies is another across-the-board adaptation for SIOP. SIOP’s breakdown of ‘good’ assessment is yet another tool that can be adapted to any classroom, because we all must assess our students and ourselves, regardless of our program model. The difference between SIOP and something else is that SIOP shows the reader what it means, rather than making vague recommendations. This is especially useful for teachers new to the field.

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol has value to a variety of teachers as well as students, including ELLs, special needs, and those struggling in a particular school subject. SIOP can be implemented across many different contexts because its standards are aimed at

general teaching practices and its components are universal to good teaching. SIOP also is useful as a program model because it goes a step further than an approach, method, or technique. As a protocol, it gives explicit instructions for delivering effective Content-Based Instruction to students through its clear structure, relatable examples, and detailed grading matrices.

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