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Autism is a developmental disorder that has two main characteristics: the first one is persistent difficulties in starting, understanding, and maintaining social relationships and interactions. The second one is repetitive patterns of behaviours and interests (Baron Cohen 2008; Black et al 2014). Even though both of these must be present from childhood, they are often not as evident since many autistic people learn to mask their differences (Black et al 2014).

Autism can also come with other problems or characteristics such as trouble sleeping or restricted eating. Many autistic people have Sensory Processing Disorder, which is characterised by hypersensitivity to visual, tactile, or auditory stimuli. Issues with higher executive brain functions are also common, i.e., problems with starting tasks on time, organising work, completing the task that are already started, procrastination, getting easily distracted, bad working memory, and so on.

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A common stereotype is that autistic people have problems with learning languages, e.g., autistic kids start speaking their first language later than other kids. This is not entirely true. The spectrum is wide, and, while some autistic children start speaking later, others have exceptional linguistic talent and learn to speak, read, and write ahead of their peers (Baron Cohen 2008). Likewise, many might have exceptional talent for second language acquisition.

In addition, some aspects of autism might impact specific language skills. For example, many autistic people struggle with small talk, understanding metaphors, or sarcasm.

What words and symbols to use

Autism is listed in the Diagnostic Manuals as 'Autism Spectrum Disorder'. However, many autistic advocates do not like the word 'disorder'. Because studies show that autism is a natural and evolutionary-beneficial neurological diversity (Silberman 2017; Baron Cohen 2020), they prefer 'Autism Spectrum Condition'. Also, because it is an integral part of who they are, the majority of autistic people prefer identity-first language, so 'autistic person' instead of 'a person with autism'.

The autistic community is by and large against the use of blue and the puzzle symbol for representation. This is because both are associated with some questionable institutions that claim to, but do not really support autistic people. When celebrating autism or raising awareness, opt for the rainbow infinity symbol instead.

Autistic students in your classroom

You might think that, if you ever had an autistic student in your classroom, you would know about it, but this is not necessarily true. Many people, especially women, remain undiagnosed well into their adulthood (Rynkiewicz et al 2019). Furthermore, many people might have some, but not all of the autistic traits, and while they would not get an official autism diagnosis, they might experience similar problems as those who have all of the traits.

Let's consider a couple of examples at different levels of English ability that illustrate the idea of meaningful communication. Imagine a teacher is working with students at an elementary level of English who are learning or practising the names of colours. The teacher produces sheets of paper with perhaps four or five coloured circles on them. Most sheets are different from each other, but each sheet has at least one other that matches it exactly. Each student receives a sheet and is asked not to let other people see their sheet. The task is for each student to find another student whose sheet exactly matches their own. Armed with a simple structure, such as *Do you have a ... circle?*, students mingle around the classroom, asking and answering each other's questions, until they have each found a matching partner. This type of task can be easily adapted to focus on shapes, body parts, and a range of other lexical sets. Contrast this with a situation where a teacher indicates different objects that the whole class can see and asks questions such as *What colour is this?* and expects students to respond with the correct colour. In that case, no meaningful communication takes place since all students already know the answer.

With students at an intermediate level of English, teachers using CLT methodology might ask them to work in pairs with a short text related to a topic they are currently covering in class, such as the environment. Each member of the pair is given the same text but with different parts of the text missing. The teacher might remove concrete facts, such as figures, dates or places, or remove reasons, causes and effects, depending on the type of text and the sophistication of the students. Without looking at each other's version of the text, the students need to ask and answer questions in order to reconstruct the entire text.

At an advanced level of English, teachers might put students into groups and give them a roleplay situation. It might be roleplaying a planning meeting at a company that produces, say, apps for smartphones. Each student is given a card that outlines their role (e.g. sales manager, app designer) and what they want to achieve through the meeting (e.g. hiring more sales staff). They are then asked to roleplay the meeting, each attempting to achieve as many of their (sometimes competing) goals as possible while reaching a consensus.

Assessment and correction

During the task, the students' focus should be on achieving the communicative aim, whether that's finding someone in the class with matching information, reconstructing a text, or successfully completing a roleplay. The teacher's role is to employ ongoing informal assessment by monitoring the interactions and making sure that each pair and group stays on task and does not get distracted by trying to correct each other's use of language. It's worth making the importance of completing the task explicit at the start of any communicative task. As teachers monitor the students, they should make a note of any errors that they want to focus on after the activity. This is usually most effective when the teacher selects errors that more than one student makes since focusing on these is likely to be of use to more students. While the teacher may choose to ignore most other errors, it is sometimes worth using 'hot correction' with individual students. With hot correction, the teacher quickly makes a note of the correct form on a slip of paper and simply places it on the table in front of the student, without interrupting the interaction.

Conclusion

Communicative Language Teaching prepares students for communicative demands outside the classroom using techniques that develop communication skills. In its pure form, some teachers may feel that there is not enough focus on accuracy and language structure to meet their needs and the needs of their students. However, introducing elements of the approach into your classroom and reconsidering your role as a teacher and the types of tasks you ask your students to take part in will motivate and engage your students while developing their communication skills.

Further Reading

Larsen-Freeman, Diane and Marti Anderson, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, 3rd Edn. (Oxford University Press, 2011), Chapter 9.

Lightbown, Patsy M. and Nina Spada, *How Languages are Learned*, 2nd Edn. (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 91-101.

Thornbury, Scott, *30 Language Teaching Methods* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 60-63.

Wesche, Marjorie Bingham and Peter Skehan, "Communicative, Task-based, and Content-based Language Instruction", in Kaplan, Robert B, *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (Oxford University Press, 2002), Chapter 17