



**Context-Based Language Learning and General Semantics**

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**Abstract**

We are in continuous search of a suitable method to teach our learners any subject. The search becomes a mountainous task when we struggle in our instruction in ESL classrooms, especially in a competitive world where lives are struggling with many complexities. In this context, the use of English as a global language has become almost everyone's resort to gain linguistic skills as employability skills. Hence, communication is always the focus point. It is an ambitious move to consider the CLT method or approach as a panacea since its primary focus is communication. But this method has its demerits due to its rigidity in the absence of competent teachers. Secondly, its tendency to underestimate learners' context does not enable the learners to become linguistically competent users. Hence, in the coming days, Context-Based Language Learning will replace CLT.

Moreover, considering the psycho-social relationships among individuals, there is a new approach waiting to knock on the doors of the ESL classroom which is known as Korzybski's General Semantics. This paper intends to discuss the fact that CLT is not an end in itself. The replacement method known as Context-Based Language Learning, along with the incorporation of much-needed human values, will rather make the meaning-making process a classroom technique.

**Keywords:** Context-Based Language Learning (CBL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), General Semantics, ESL Pedagogy, Language Learning Context

Method is a systematic practice for the optimization of language learning, especially in a classroom situation. The basis of a method lies in the theory of language learning that it follows. A method brings before the learners the 'what' of language content in a systematic way, which is known as the 'how' of content presentation.



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In this connection, E. M. Anthony (in Allen & Campbell, 1979) observes that “Method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts and all of which is based upon the selected approach. An approach is axiomatic. A method is procedural. Within one approach there can be many methods” (p. 8).

What Anthony emphasizes is that the ‘approach’ to language teaching forms the philosophical basis derived from theories and principles of language learning. Therefore, it is a belief document that leads toward the selection of various methodologies. The overall plan is ‘method’ and the implementation or transactional part is ‘technique’.

An approach is an ideology that is directly drawn from language teaching-learning policy, referring to the underlying rationale for providing a course in language teaching. One approach carries several methods, and one method may determine several techniques.

Richards and Rodgers (2006) rightly observe:

“According to Anthony’s model, approach is the level at which assumptions and beliefs about language and language learning are specified; method is the level at which theory is put into practice and at which choices are made about the particular skills to be taught, the content to be taught, and the order in which the content will be presented; technique is the level at which classroom procedures are described.” (p. 19)

In relation to the ideas about method, approach, and technique discussed here, we experience a rigid environment in ESL classrooms. Hence, in this paper I will explain that the predominance of such methods in our language classrooms has been unreasonable. As a result, Context-Based Language Learning (CBL), guided by the principles of General Semantics, can replace the present Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Here, I shall provide a cursory glance at the three main methods used in Indian classrooms vis-à-vis the new CBL supported by the principles of General Semantics. At first, the Grammar-Translation Method, which is an age-old teaching method for learning English as a second language. This is also known as the classical method as it follows the rigorous methodology of learning classical languages like Greek and Latin. The major thrust areas of the GT method are the focus on grammatical rules, the translation of texts from the mother tongue to the target language or vice versa, and memorizing vocabulary to become proficient users of the target language.



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According to Venkateswaran (1995), “language learning is viewed as memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the two systems – morphology and syntax of the foreign language.” It is observed in many ways that this method is still dominant in second language classrooms in India.

Secondly, in India, the recommendation of the Kunzru Committee appointed by the Government of India led to the development of a structural syllabus, which believed in the principle of vocabulary selection and control over other linguistic items. The method generally listed linguistic items arranged in teaching order accompanied by illustrative sentences. Mastery was intended through repetition and drills of a given structure.

The advocates of this method believe that by memorizing dialogues and performing pattern drills, the chances of producing mistakes are minimized. The teaching of grammar here is essentially inductive since through proper drills learners can form correct analyses of their language use.

Users of a language, in order to make their communication effective, certainly require knowledge of the social meaning of linguistic forms and their functions. The communicative competence of a learner includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence.

This philosophy of language learning gave rise to a new classroom approach known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Here, the major focus is on supporting a wide variety of classroom activities reflecting the communicative aspect of language learning. This approach believes more in message than medium, appropriateness over correctness, fluency over accuracy, discourse over sentence, use over usage, function over form, communicative competence over linguistic competence, with a supportive environment in the classroom and a tolerant attitude towards errors and language variation.

However, CLT was developed in the West as a reaction to older methods, and the problem now arises for ESL learners because of their different cultural, social, and physical conditions. Thus, a modified version of CLT conducive to local conditions and demands is the need of the hour in order to bring real working command of English to learners. This new dimension of pedagogy is known as Context-Based Language Learning (CBL).



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In fact, CBL is a flexible mode of transaction. It does not refuse to accommodate old methodologies or innovations, but the learners' context gains priority as the first step of language learning. It denounces the prejudice that CLT is an end in itself and that without CLT language learning is not possible. CLT gives priority to methodology, whereas CBL sends methodologies to the last rung of the learning process, considering that method is just one of the many factors in language learning.

Bax (2003) makes a comparative study between these two approaches, where he criticizes CLT and questions how unreasonable it is to think oneself backward if one does not adopt CLT. Instead, he praises CBL, saying that in this approach other methods and approaches may be equally valid. It provides an opportunity to analyze the learning context from where the teacher can move on to take account of learners' learning styles and learning strategies. Thus, classroom culture, regional culture, and national culture of the learners must be considered. Classroom culture helps in motivation and group activities, whereas local culture makes us aware of regional differences and the status of both teacher and learner in the community. Finally, national culture weighs political and religious considerations. Only then does the methodology or language focus come to the forefront.

Such an approach, which affords many layers of careful thought in favour of individual learning, can be strengthened through the principles of General Semantics, making teachers more resourceful, especially in their attitudinal composure in the ESL classroom.

General Semantics is a discipline of a non-Aristotelian system propounded by Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski (1879–1950), a Polish-American scholar. It is concerned with the quality of human life—interpersonal, social, professional, national, international, and environmental. It emphasizes the powerful relationship between language, thinking, attitude, and behaviour for clarity of communication and quality relationships among humans.

His theories, mainly presented in his two major works *Manhood of Humanity* (1921) and *Science and Sanity* (1933), have become a key to achieving human sanity and preparing better futures of mutual understanding.

In fact, the major problem with us is that humans behave as if we know everything—'know-alls'. This 'allness' attitude creates problems in communication because there is a tendency to disregard the attitudes and evaluations of others. General Semantics teaches us how to listen



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to others with due respect and speak in return while owning responsibility for what we say. Language is essentially multiordinal because of different levels of abstraction. Words mean differently to different people at different times and in different contexts. Language is essentially culture-bound and context-bound. Therefore, one context, even within the same cultural habits, must not be compared with another context in order to draw inferences.

Korzybski observes that “we do not realize what tremendous power the structure of a habitual language has... it enslaves us through the mechanisms of semantic reactions.”

Adapting to the symbolic means of communication using language is natural to human beings. It developed perhaps to build intimacy among people and to understand each other cordially. Unfortunately, language has now emerged as a dangerous weapon of mis-evaluation and misconception.

In this context, Dash (2014) observes that:

“Talking or dialogue seems directly related to one’s thinking... Communication, particularly dialogue or conversation, is a distinctive human prerogative because we reduce ourselves to the status of objects when we fail to communicate.”

Owing to the usefulness of communication, teachers in classrooms must adopt an instructional system using techniques of abstracting, such as selecting, separating, summarizing, condensing, and deducing. This will help learners carefully manipulate the symbolic nature of language for better communication.

In a classroom situation, the General Semantics approach aims to achieve precision, economy, and exactitude through brainstorming or problem-solving activities. The objective is to attempt accuracy in communication. While teaching English as a second language, the principles of General Semantics can be followed in the classroom. Activities can be designed to help students differentiate observation from inference. For example, if a pair of students debates on a topic while others listen carefully, one listener may summarize the discussion while the speakers evaluate the summary. If the summary is unsatisfactory, the process may be repeated for better observation.

Thus, the ESL classroom adopting a General Semantics approach places great responsibility on the teacher as a facilitator of learning and a guide for the learners’ future development.



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The approach advocates flexibility in curriculum transaction and suggests the integration of various methods whenever necessary.

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