Unpackaging the past: 'CLT' through *ELTJ* keywords

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ELT history is often viewed as a succession of methods, but such a view tends to rest on a 'packaging up' and labelling of complex and often contested past developments. This process ignores both continuity with earlier developments and diversity of contemporary opinion and often seems to serve as a way to clear the ground for self-proclaimed 'progress'. This article describes a study that was undertaken to promote an alternative view of the past. Taking as a starting point the way communicative language teaching (CLT) seems to be currently in the process of being packaged up in readiness for the 'dustbin of history', the study combined corpus-based and qualitative procedures to explore keywords in ELTJ *articles during the early communicative period. By identifying themes discussed by contemporary writers themselves, we highlight areas of continuity with 'pre-communicative' methodology, and diversity within the communicative discussion itself, thus subverting the assumption that there was ever a wholly distinct, unitary, or 'classical' CLT to be lightly superseded.*

Introduction: against 'packaging up' of the ELT past

Aside from Howatt's (1984) *A History of English Language Teaching*, issued in a second edition in 2004 (Howatt with Widdowson 2004), there have been very few attempts to survey the ELT professional past which do not adopt an essentially methods-based perspective. The very popular books by Larsen-Freeman (1986/2000) and Richards and Rodgers (1986/2001), used as core texts for teacher training in many countries, are the best-known examples of a general tendency in the profession to 'package up' the past by assigning method labels to bounded periods of history. Past methods are presented as fixed sets of procedures and principles, with little attention being paid to the contexts in which these developed, the way alternatives were debated at the time, or indeed the extent to which there was continuity with previous periods. Both of these books describe how, one after another, discrete sets of ideas and practices came to prominence in the language teaching profession, only to be replaced—seemingly *en bloc*—by a new method when the underlying theories were superseded. The structure of Larsen-Freeman's initial sequence, which leads from 'The Grammar-Translation Method' to 'The Direct Method' to 'The Audio-Lingual Method', is adopted also by Richards and Rodgers in

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their initial overview of 'Major trends in twentieth-century language teaching' (Part I of their second edition), although the latter authors do give some additional attention to nineteenth-century predecessors of the Direct Method and to the pre-communicative British tradition of situational language teaching.

One problem with viewing the past as a 'decontextualized, quasi-allegorical procession of methods' (Smith 2005: xvi) is that this is fundamentally ahistorical: statements tend to be made according to a 'mythology' that has been developed around methods, often as a way of stereotyping, indeed demonizing past practices, rather than being well attested in contemporary sources (cf. Stern 1983: 77). Just two brief examples will have to suffice here. Firstly, the label 'Grammar-Translation Method' has been used for more than a century in all types of professional forum as a kind of shorthand for practices involving translation and explicit, deductive grammar teaching, but only opponents of such practices seem to have ever used the term (Howatt with Widdowson op.cit.: 151). Reform Movement methodologists coined it and thereby 'packaged up' the practices they disapproved of in a particular context, at a particular time (Germany, in the late nineteenth century), in the service of a concerted attack upon them. A second example is the way the 'Direct Method' label has been persistently misused to designate 'one very basic rule: No translation is allowed' (Larsen-Freeman op.cit.: 23). This oversimplification seems largely attributable to a tendency on the part of Anglo-American methodologists, throughout the twentieth century, to associate the Direct Method with the practices adopted in Berlitz schools (cf. Richards and Rodgers op.cit.: 12), to ignore the broader, less dogmatic principles of 'direct methodology' as established for French schools in 1901 (see Puren 1988), and, indeed, to ignore the debates—including with reference to use or non-use of L1—within the wider movement that gave rise to them.

Bringing this up to date now, we wish to suggest that similar tendencies are at work in the way different strands of debate in the 1970s and 1980s around 'communicative' and 'learner-centred' ideas and practices have become 'methodized' within current ELT discourse—packaged up as a kind of 'standard CLT'—in part, at least, to clear the way for self-proclaimed 'progress'. Evidence that communicative ideas are being readied in this way for the 'dustbin of history' can be found, for example, in Bax's (2003) 'The end of CLT: a context approach to language teaching', which differs from Holliday (1994), it would seem, only in the brashness of the author's proposal for a new named 'approach' to *replace* 'CLT' (rather, that is, than build upon affordances within the communicative approach, as Holliday suggests). A similar process seems to be at work in the way Task-based Language Teaching is increasingly presented as something different from communicative language teaching, rather than as a relatively 'strong version' *of* it. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 94–5) seems to confirm this when he says: 'As the novelty of communicative language teaching is gradually wearing thin [...], TBLT is gaining ground'. As this quotation additionally suggests, even those least favourable

to the concept of method (Kumaravadivelu being primary among them) appear to need the concept to describe the past, viewing CLT as a labelled package, distinct from a post-method condition. Finally, Richards and Rodgers (op.cit.) seem at once conscious of the problem of retrospective oversimplification of CLT and concerned to have it both ways; in their second (2001) edition, 'Current communicative approaches' is the heading of the concluding part of the book (suggesting that we do still live in a communicative era), but the chapter on 'Communicative language teaching' that ended the 1986 edition is now presented as describing 'what we [...] might call the "Classical View of Communicative Language Teaching"' (ibid.: 151). However, the idea that there *can* be a 'Classical View' of communicative language teaching sits uncomfortably with the views expressed in the chapter itself (unchanged from the first edition) that communicative language teaching is 'best considered an approach rather than a method' (ibid.: 172) and that 'There is no single text or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative' (ibid.: 155).

The kind of procession-of-methods view of the past, including the recent past, that we have been both illustrating and critiquing is rarely questioned, partly perhaps because there has been so little historical research in support of alternative perspectives. Until now, Stern's (op. cit.: 84) call for 'the kind of specialized study needed as a basis for a better historical perspective'—which is seen by him as an essential foundation for the appropriate theorization of language teaching—has only rarely been heeded. What we aim to explore in this article, then, is a more rigorous, less 'mythologizing' way of viewing the past, as an alternative to the methods-based perspective on history that tends to dominate in our profession. Our study focused on the relatively recent discourse of a particular journal (*ELTJ* itself), thereby constituting a 'specialized study' in Stern's sense, but one which also aimed to illustrate more broadly how historical research can contribute to the theorization of language teaching.

Aims of the study

In our study, we attempted to analyse a slice of recent professional history with reference to contemporary sources, in order to ascertain what ideas were important in the years that are said to have produced 'CLT'. We wished to look at the 'early communicative period' from the perspective of how ideas were presented at the time, not from the desire to set up an alternative grand narrative but in an attempt to see what its characteristic concerns were, bearing in mind the fact that canonical descriptions are not easy to identify but also that 'CLT' is currently, nevertheless, being 'packaged up' and methodized. Our aim was to examine ideas on their own terms, without necessarily applying a CLT label to concepts or assuming a cohesion that may have come to be retrospectively applied. Thus, the guiding questions we sought answers to were as follows:

- What preoccupations were common (as attested by sources) in the era that produced the 'communicative approach' to language teaching?

- What was distinctively new compared with what had gone before?
- To what extent, then, was communicative language teaching really an internally cohesive 'bundle' of ideas?

The corpus and the approach to keyword analysis

For the purposes of this exploration, a corpus was compiled, comprising all articles from *ELTJ* during a period from 1958 to 1986. ('*ELTJ*' is used in this article as a 'catch-all' term: see below for the journal's actual titles in this period.) Only articles were included in the corpus. Reviews, announcements, information for potential contributors, and so on were excluded. *ELTJ* was chosen as the focus of the investigation for several reasons, the first being that the periodical, founded in 1946, was old enough to provide articles from the period prior to the emergence of the 'communicative movement' (Howatt with Widdowson op.cit.: 326). Texts evidencing writers' preoccupations before this emergence were necessary to form a comparison with 'communicative period' articles. More importantly, it was felt that, of all the sources available, *ELTJ* best captured insights and ideas from across the language teaching profession. In a 1973 editorial, W.R. Lee (28/1: 2, 1973)[1] explained that he aimed to publish contributions for 'language teachers and other specialists', ranging 'from the article on language-teaching theory or on a piece of research to the article on classroom procedures and techniques'. This ethos of inclusion appears to have been continued by Richard Rossner, Lee's successor as Editor, whose new Advisory Panel included academics, representatives of the British Council and leaders in the burgeoning commercial EFL sector (36/1: front matter, 1981).

In acknowledgement of the fact that this analysis would apply the particular filter of *ELTJ* discourse to professional history (rather, that is, than portray it comprehensively, directly, or 'transparently'), articles were organized in a way that reflected changes in the Journal's own past. Texts were therefore grouped into collections that corresponded to distinguishable editorial phases (see Smith 2007):

1 **1958–1973.** From issue 12/4 of *English Language Teaching*, when W. R. Lee first took over as Editor, until the end of Volume 27, at which point the title changed to *English Language Teaching Journal (ELTJ)*.
2 **1973–1981.** The period from the 'relaunch' to Lee's departure in 1981 (Volumes 28–35), following which the title changed to *ELT Journal*.
3 **1981–1986.** The period of Richard Rossner's editorship (Volumes 36–40).

Following assembly of the texts, the first phase of the investigation was carried out. This was a computer-based keywords analysis using WordSmith Tools (Scott 2004) which processed the historically grouped collections of articles to identify outstandingly frequent words in each. The procedure whereby keywords are identified statistically by means of comparison with a 'reference corpus' has previously been shown to be effective in indicating important themes in a text or corpus (Scott and Tribble 2006). The present study attempted to extend this principle of comparison to the identification of *historical* differences;

by comparing groups of texts from the same journal but from different historical periods, it was hoped that it would be possible to identify overall changes in theme.

The big picture: 1981–1986 versus 1958–1973 keywords

A series of keyword tables was compiled by comparing each collection (as a 'test corpus') against one other (as a 'reference'), in every possible combination. Of the six resulting keyword lists, the 1981–1986 versus 1958–1973 comparison, shown in Table 1 below, seemed to be of particular interest. The 1981–1986 corpus represents a period by which time the communicative approach had, according to the literature, emerged as a recognizable phenomenon (indeed, Howatt with Widdowson (op.cit.) identify the 1970s as the first 'communicative decade'). The 1958–1973 reference corpus, by contrast, is composed of articles that can be assumed to be more or less 'innocent' of communicative ideas. By identifying newly prominent words, the 1981–1986 versus 1958–1973 comparison seemed to give a useful preliminary indication of conceptual shifts that had occurred in professional discourse between the two periods.

TABLE 1
Top ten words in the 1981–1986 versus 1958–1973 lemma list

Rank	Keyword	Keyness
1	*communicative*	1458.70
2	*learner*	1126.20
3	*activity*	679.93
4	*student*	616.94
5	*task*	516.57
6	*text*	497.08
7	*ELT*	449.20
8	*syllabus*	406.44
9	*focus*	387.89
10	*strategy*	381.75

The prominence of *communicative* in this table, overwhelmingly the most important item in the keyword list, seemed to confirm the view that the early movement was one dominated by the 'single powerful idea' (Howatt with Widdowson op.cit.: 250) of communication, although it is interesting that, by 1981–1986 at least, it was the adjective (collocating particularly with 'competence', 'approach', and 'activities') that predominated in *ELTJ* discourse, rather than the noun *communication* (no. 18 in the list).

More pertinently to the aims of the study, the data appeared to confirm Richards and Rodgers' (op.cit.) portrayal of events, in which communicative ideas effected an upheaval in ELT professional discourse. Indeed, many parallels with their account could be drawn.

Concerning the high ranking of *learner*, Richards and Rodgers' (ibid.: 166) mini-history of CLT describes a substantial shift towards a learner-centred perspective. The prominence of *activity* and *task* in the data also seems to strongly support their view that the adoption of a variety of 'task-based communication activities' along with games, role plays, and simulations was a central, practical feature of the approach (ibid.: 169). Of further interest was the list of keywords derived by reversing the procedure used to generate the results shown in Table 1, now using the oldest (1958–1973) collection as the test corpus and the most recent (1981–1986) articles as a reference. By testing for keywords in reverse chronological order (see Table 2 below), it was possible to identify words that had become *less* prominent. Once again, it was easy to identify parallels with Richards and Rodgers' version of events. In particular, the inclusion of items such as *drill*, *laboratory*, and *pattern* accorded with these writers' description of a decline in concern for grammar patterns and techniques of structural drilling. Richards and Rodgers (ibid.: 44–6, 59–62) explain that earlier approaches were essentially drill- and pattern-based and report the view that in CLT 'drilling may occur, but peripherally' (ibid.: 156).

TABLE 2
Top ten words in the 1958–1973 versus 1981–1986 lemma list

Rank	Keyword	Keyness
1	*he*	609.43
2	*English*	513.16
3	*his*	362.01
4	*pupil*	334.51
5	*sound*	281.75
6	*drill*	207.57
7	*laboratory*	205.72
8	*be*	204.95
9	*pattern*	200.82
10	*vowel*	172.17

Uncovering complexity: qualitative analysis of keywords in context

Once we had arrived at the 1981–1986 versus 1958–1973 keyword list as a starting point, the next step was to look more deeply and carefully into the history of prominent words so as to ascertain their actual role within *ELTJ* discourse. Corpus techniques necessarily extract and isolate words from the meaning-giving context of their original environment (Hunston 2002; Baker 2006). Using the WordSmith Tools Concord program to locate keyword occurrences, then reading the complete articles in which they appeared, a 'word-history' for each highly ranked item was compiled. 'Word-history' is our way of referring to a process whereby data that had been stripped from their textual environment by the keywords procedure can be recontextualized via a combination of concordancing and 'by eye' procedures. A much more detailed and considered assessment of the role individual keywords played in each

period could thereby be formed. In several cases, this analysis pointed to much greater continuity between periods, in terms of the underlying conceptual content of the discussions preoccupying writers, than our surface investigation of terms had at first indicated.

Referring back: *learner*, *task*, and *activity*

Two particular phenomena were observable which supported this view of underlying historical continuity. The first was that *learner*, the second most prominent keyword in our main list, appears to have been discussed earlier than, and independently of 'communicativeness'. It is frequently implied that learner-centredness is a core characteristic of the communicative approach (for example Ellis 36/2: 73, 1982), but the word-history for *learner* revealed that this emphasis had a provenance quite independent of the communicative discussion itself. In the mid-1970s, both Elliott (28/3: 189–97, 1974) and Saitz (28/3: 220–1, 1974) describe the period in which they are writing as one in which concern for learner psychology has begun to revive after a lengthy period of neglect. The keyword *learner* collocates quite frequently with 'motivation' in the 1973–1981 period, and the notion of learner motivation comes to be discussed with increasing enthusiasm and theoretical sophistication by a number of authors. Nation (29/2: 115–20, 1975) introduces the concepts of 'primary' and 'secondary' motivation (ibid.: 115) and Alatis (30/4: 265–82, 1976) extends this theoretical base with reference to instrumental and integrative types of motivation (ibid.: 268), while Allwright (31/4: 267–74, 1977) argues that motivation poses 'the key problem for the language teacher' (ibid.: 267). Perhaps the best illustration of the ascendancy of learner motivation as a particularly important idea in the 1970s is Foldberg's (32/1: 15–23, 1977) passionate espousal of 'true, inner motivation as the be-all and end-all of successful language learning' (ibid.: 15). Thus, according to word-history evidence, later writers on the central role of the learner within the communicative approach were espousing ideas that were already well in place and that seem to have evolved within a wholly independent discussion.

A second example of historical continuity is the way some concepts appeared to persist in the discourse between periods but came to be labelled by new terms. The word-histories for the keywords *task* and *activity* made clear that, whereas contributors in the 1973–1981 period refer less frequently to 'tasks' or 'activities' than 1981–1986 contributors, many of the elements of the discussion that later came to surround these terms could be identified in articles concerned with 'games'. Indeed, as early as 1969, W. R. Lee—himself the author of several books about classroom games (for example Lee 1976)—wrote an editorial (34/1: 1, 1969) distinguishing British language teaching methods from their American, audiolingual counterparts partly on the basis of their inclusion of activities that involve 'using the language to communicate with others' (ibid.: 1). In the 1973–1981 corpus, writers who evidence no interest in or contact with communicative ideas are nevertheless enthusiastic advocates of game-oriented lessons. Rees (29/2: 135–43, 1975) typifies this tendency, describing 12 different kinds of question-asking games, more than one of which is clearly a role play

or simulation, while another, in which an image is withheld and then partially revealed by the teacher so as to stimulate student responses, has many of the features of an 'information gap' as described by writers in the 1981–1986 period (for example Harmer 36/3: 164–8, 1982). What is particularly interesting about these earlier articles is that games are frequently justified on the same grounds as later communicative 'tasks' and 'activities'. Rees (op.cit.: 136) himself suggests that games provide an opportunity to relieve students from excessive teacher control. Games make language learning more 'democratic', and the duty of teachers 'is clearly to provide practice for all our pupils'. He also demonstrates a concern for what would later be described as authenticity, recognizing as a limitation of two of his games the fact that 'they are unreal in the sense that the questioner is already aware of the answer before he asks the question' (op.cit.: 138).

Shifts in reference: *communicative* and *syllabus*

Taking into account the contents of the word-histories referred to above, it seems reasonable to assert that, beneath the surface of terminological upheaval, some of the ideas now associated with CLT were rooted in earlier discourse. When examining *communicative*, however, the 'super-keyword' in Table 1, it was possible to discern the converse of this phenomenon: *dis*continuity within the discussion surrounding the term. Tracing the associations of the term in *ELTJ* articles, it is possible to identify two phases that are almost as distinct from one another as from the foregoing 'pre-communicative' period. The first is reflected in the 1973–1981 collection of articles, when 'communicative' and 'notional' or 'functional' often appear as interchangeable terms. Thus, in the first *ELTJ* article to include the phrase 'communicative language teaching', Black and Butzkamm (32/4: 270–4, 1978) equate this with the development of materials according to 'notional categories' (ibid.: 272). Even by the end of the subsequent 1981–1986 period, the association between a communicative approach to language teaching and notional-functional principles of linguistic description is never wholly thrown off. In 1985, Swan (39/2: 76–87, 1985) suggests that 'for many people the central idea in communicative language teaching is probably that of a "semantic syllabus"' (ibid.: 78). Later in his article, Swan indeed complains that the 'new toy' effect of the approach 'is leading us to look at everything in functional terms' (ibid.: 81).

On the other hand, in the pages of *ELTJ* at least, it was also during the 1981–1986 period that the beginnings of a second phase can be identified, as the simple conflation of communicative teaching with functional principles came to be challenged. Thus, Ellis (36/2: 73–81, 1982) appears to make a deliberate effort to move the communicative discussion away from its notional-functional roots. Harmer (36/3: 164–8, 1982) also seems to go out of his way to break with the earlier, notional-functional formulation, even commenting that '[T]here is, after all, nothing especially communicative about teaching functions!' (ibid.: 165). The label 'communicative', he suggests, can in fact only be considered with respect to *activities* (ibid.). Within the space of a few years what *communicative*

represents has undergone a considerable shift within the pages of *ELTJ*: the term has become contested and is a site of rapid change.

This shift of focus, not to say tension, within the communicative discussion is also clearly evident when looking at incidences of another prominent keyword, *syllabus*. In particular, in articles reviewing N. S. Prabhu's Communicational Teaching Project (then being conducted in southern India), there is a clear sense that any earlier consensus concerning the nature of a communicative approach has become fragmented. In the most 'anti-functional' of these, Greenwood (39/4: 268–73, 1985) notes, with obvious satisfaction, the project's rejection of notional-functional, as well as structural, approaches to syllabus design (ibid.:268). It is clear that, by the end of the period represented in the corpus, ideas regarding the nature of 'communicativeness' and of 'syllabus', had floated free of their earlier anchoring in notional-functional syllabus design.

Conclusion: delabelling, unpackaging, demethodizing the past

Did, then, the ideas that were discussed in the pages of *ELTJ* in the 1970s and 1980s contribute to as chronologically distinct, internally cohesive and 'settled' an approach as a methods-based perspective on the past might nowadays be suggesting? One aim of our investigation was to analyse *ELTJ* articles as a means of discovering the extent to which the coming to prominence of new ideas actually constituted a revolution in professional discourse. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the way we attempted to combine a qualitative with a quantitative approach, it is difficult to propose simple conclusions. On the one hand, the quantitative data generated within the first, statistical, keyword phase of the project appear to bear out a sense of dramatic change in which old concepts are ejected and new ideas vigorously taken up. On the other hand, confidence in this view declines when the word-histories developed during the second, qualitative phase of the project, are considered. The conclusions suggested by statistical keyword analysis—based on shifts in the prominence of terms on the surface of professional discourse—often diverged from those emerging when we constructed word-histories by viewing keywords in the context of the articles in which they appeared.

Despite shifts in terminology, it was possible to discern underlying continuity in ideas from a previous period. In the case of the keyword *communicative*, another phenomenon was revealed: the term rose newly to prominence and maintained its dominance, but we found that the way it was used shifted dramatically *within* the period most associated with the emergence of 'the' communicative approach. This, too, seemed to contradict—in a different way—any notion of there having been a 'unitary' CLT in the 1980s, at least where the central idea of 'communicativeness' is concerned.

This is, of course, what advocates of communicative language teaching have tended to claim all along: that it is in fact an 'approach' allowing of different emphases and different procedures, rather than a prescriptive 'method'. The views of originators of ideas are, however, commonly neglected in the seemingly relentless search for the 'new' that characterizes ELT discourse, and, as we suggested in the Introduction,

the communicative approach has—like other ideas and practices from the past—become increasingly 'methodized', reduced in representation to a standard or 'Classical' version of 'CLT'.

As an antidote to this tendency, we have argued for a delabelling, unpackaging, indeed demethodizing approach to the past, illustrated by our deconstruction of emerging over-static, oversimplified notions of what characterizes or characterized 'CLT' but with an application, by extension, to many past methods. The close reference to contemporary sources that we have been advocating will, we hope, be adopted by an increasing number of researchers, whom we envisage reaching with us into the so-called dustbin (we would prefer to say 'store house' or 'treasure chest'!) of history, removing the labels on method packages and unbundling them, all in the service of recovering the professional past and recycling it as a complex and usable resource for the present.

Note

1 *ELTJ* articles in the corpus are not included in our list of references. Instead, bibliographical details are provided within the text as follows: volume and issue number, followed by page number(s), then publication year.

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