

**Teachers' Attitudes to the Communicative Language Teaching Approach**  
**A Comparison of Dutch and German Language educators**

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September 2012

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Question

There are different attitudes in the Member States of the EU to the economic and social realities of English language infiltration (Ehlerding 7). The European Commission is active in stimulating the spread of English. In Germany and the Netherlands, there have been changes in the curriculum to meet the demands of potential speakers in situations in which they use the language (Springer 2). In Germany, English language teaching policies are documented in *Bildungsstandards*. These are determined for each federal state separately. However, the norms and objectives are shaped by the federal politics' language policies (Ehlerding 24). In an analysis of the *Bildungsstandards* of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, the status of English language teaching in Germany is described as follows:

English language teaching in present-day Germany is still largely restricted to the teaching of formal linguistic correctness. Grammar occupies the most prominent position of all the areas of ELT and is, therefore, granted the lion's share of classroom time in most school children's English language education. Creativity and communication are still considered secondary virtues and thus rather kept in the background, despite the fact that they are described as the paramount principles and virtues of ELT today in the works cited above. (Ehlerding 5)

According to a study by the European Commission, English is the first foreign language spoken in addition to the mother tongue in Germany and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, English is spoken by 87% of the population. In Germany, 51% of the population can use English as a spoken language (Eurobarometer 4: 2005). The Netherlands has long had a leading position in the development of its foreign language policy (Graaff 41-42). In view of this, it may be claimed that teachers from the Netherlands may still be more progressive in

applying relatively new teaching approaches. This may be a reason why the level of English competence is higher in the Netherlands than in Germany.

One of these relatively new methodologies is called “communicative language teaching” (henceforth CLT). In this study, teachers from two secondary school types, the *Gymnasium* in the German education system (‘grammar school’) and the *VWO/Gymnasium* (‘grammar school’) in the Netherlands, were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The data provided by the questionnaire served to identify attitudes towards communicative language teaching. Thus, the objective of this study is to explore teachers’ attitudes towards the communicative language teaching approach. An attitude is affected by a wide range of factors. One of these factors considered in this study is the ethnic background of the subjects, and whether it has an impact on what teachers’ view is on CLT. Thus, the question considered was whether or not Dutch and German teachers have different attitudes towards the communicative approach. This is formulated in the following hypothesis.

#### Hypothesis 1

Dutch teachers of English are generally favorably disposed towards the communicative language teaching philosophy, in comparison to German teachers of English.

In Chapter 1, the significance of this study will be discussed. The purpose of this chapter, moreover, is to provide a context for the communicative language teaching approach. A brief overview of the history of CLT will be considered. In addition, it will be further explained what this language teaching methodology entails. Chapter 2 is about the research methodology. In this chapter, the research instrument (the questionnaire) is analyzed. In the final section of this chapter, essential information on the subjects and school contexts can be

found. Chapter 3 will discuss the findings of this study. Some of these findings will shed light on the attitudes of Dutch and German participants towards CLT. Also, the different attitudes of Dutch and German males are considered. All these findings result in one final concluding discussion, which can be found in Chapter 4.

### ***1.2 Significance of the Study***

Over the past several decades, an important area of emphasis in research on language education has been on communication based language teaching methodology. The fundamental idea of this method is to introduce “a sociolinguistic model of language teaching as opposed to a purely linguistic one” (Howatt 275). Teachers, then, promote a more natural language learning approach. They do this, for example, by encouraging real-life engagement with the language being learned and exposing students to authentic language material. However, “[d]espite [the] active promotion of this method in journals, conferences, and teacher training, most teachers have only a vague notion of what it entails, and visits to their classrooms often reveal a continuing reliance on earlier or idiosyncratic approaches” (Whitley 137). In order to stimulate CLT practices, it is important to observe teachers’ language teaching attitudes. A teacher’s attitude is, in fact, a key factor contributing to teaching practices (e.g. behavior used in the classroom) (Stuart 68). This study may function as source material to enhance critical thinking about culturally-influenced thinking towards language teaching. Dutch and German teachers can learn from each other and further collaborate on pedagogical techniques to reinforce language learning and provide quality education.

### ***1.3 A History of The Communicative Language Approach***

Since the language teaching profession developed at the end of the Middle Ages (Howatt 3),

many teaching theories have circulated. During the classical education movement, which started in the Middle Ages and lasted until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the learning of foreign languages was of significant importance. When students studied classical languages, such as Greek and Latin, they would become more historically educated. Students would often translate a foreign language into their own first language, and would thereby become familiar with the grammar system of a language (Thanasoulas par. 2). For a long time, there was a strong emphasis on the linguistic features of a language, on grammar rules and syntactic structures. Over the centuries, however, some linguists had argued against the deficiencies of a purely linguistic language teaching approach until more radical ideas developed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Linguistics became a reinvigorated field of study and linguists sought to engage natural language learning styles (as in first language acquisition) in the learning of a foreign language (Celik 2); the first methodologies based on these principles were called the Natural Approach and the Direct Method. Later, much later, a method proposed in the 1950s stressed the necessity of oral language competence. It favored a more behavioural view of language learning. In practice, set phrases and expressions were memorized. As a result, acts of communication remained artificial and unnatural. They were still irrelevant to real-life contexts (Thanasoulas par. 4). In Britain, a group was formed and funded to develop language teaching material for immigrant children. A methodology was sought to help these immigrant children immediately use the language in real life. In 1970, coursebooks were developed in which practical language-use exercises were incorporated. The language teaching principles were more content-oriented and this approach later developed into what is now called communicative language teaching (Howatt 275).

During the 90s, communicative teaching practices were a widely acknowledged teaching trend (Richards 22). Communicative Language Teaching's (CLT) core idea is one that

stresses “communicative proficiency [as the goal of L2 acquisition], rather than mere mastery of structures” (Li). A communicative approach to teaching the language entails that English exercises are presented in contexts where meaningful messages are delivered and reciprocated. Basically, communication between participants is the final goal. An example of a grammar lesson is that students are asked to write a recipe. The grammatical structure ‘present simple’, often used in recipes, could be taught in this way. Students are familiar with the concept of recipes. When grammatical comprehension, then, is presented in realistic contexts, students are likely to understand why learning grammar is important.

Today, a wide variety of techniques and practices, all based on the CLT philosophy, are still used for English language learning purposes. Some scholars, however, still advocate traditional English teaching methods for different reasons. However, much of the curricula designed today are influenced by the CLT philosophy (Anderson 471). One of the primary benefits of the communicative approach is that it is characterized by contextualization (Chung 34). Students are more focused on learning how to communicate: “language gets used in the process” (Howatt 277). As Howatt says concerning CLT, “[t]he focus shifts away from the language and towards the user, emphasizing the effectiveness with which the communication takes place and the skills which the user can muster in order to maintain and promote it” (Howatt 279).

## **2. Research Methodology**

### ***2.1 Questionnaire***

The type of questionnaire used is a five-point Likert scale, often used in studies to determine the attitudes of respondents. The items were presented in a random order. The teachers could rate the items, from ‘strongly agree’ (1) to ‘strongly disagree’ (5).

Subcategories in the questionnaire (see Figure 1) included:

#### *1. Attitudes towards the General Concept of Communicative Language Teaching (3 Items)*

Those statements on communicative language in general (items 1, 2 and 16) are concerned with the question of whether teachers understand language learning as a discipline in itself, or as a skill mainly necessary for acts of communication. When learning a language, the student is “confronted by a variable process [of] socio-cultural attitudes, values and emotions” (Breen 91-92). In the classroom setting, a balance between the four main skills (e.g. writing, reading, listening and speaking) underlines the varying nature of communication (Breen 90); this balance between skills is typical of CLT practice.

#### *2. Attitudes towards Communicative Grammar Teaching (8 Items)*

The statements on grammar (Items 3 – 9 and Item 13) may be used to determine if the main emphasis is put on language form, which delays the actual use, output, of the language (Savage 7). In traditional, form-focused approaches to grammar teaching, metalanguage is often used to explain the system of language. The use of terminology in language teaching, however, is not always helpful for all students. In fact, many students learn by means of other teaching strategies.

#### *3. Attitudes to Language Evaluation (2 Items)*



A typical CLT principle is to evaluate the language learning process in relative terms (Breen 150). Statements 14 and 15 are meant to establish how teachers evaluate the language learning process. According to CLT standards, language evaluation is something which is discussed between the students, who essentially determine if the message meets their communicative needs (Breen 150). The teacher adapts to different roles, such as an “advisor” or “co-communicator”, “monitoring performance”, to output enhancement (Hossen 15). The student, however, learns the skill of self-correction, which enables the student to develop a sense of “self-sufficiency” (Savage 4).

#### *4. Attitudes towards the role of teacher (3 Items)*

Statements 10, 11 and 12 are concerned with a teacher’s role in the language learning process. When students are initially taught to discover grammatical patterns themselves, they are immediately confronted with grammar in meaningful contexts. They are expected to pick up a language more naturally; the students are held responsible for L2 acquisition. A well-worded description of the (learner’s) role is that he or she has the “task of discovering *how to learn* a language (Breen 100).” Students generally acquire their grammar knowledge through the teaching of the instructor. Critics have argued, however, that this strategy might limit or slow down some pupils’ language acquisition process (Long par. 1).

**Figure 1:** Questionnaire: teachers’ attitude towards CLT

Statements
1. The texts which I use in my classes are mostly passages from existing course books, which I do not modify to any great extent.

2. Foreign language study is mainly necessary to sharpen cognitive skills; it is helpful; it is helpful for mastering practical learning skills
3. A significant amount of grammar comprehension is necessary in order to develop other language learning skills (reading, writing etc.).
4. I prefer teaching grammar to teaching other skills.
5. I teach grammar more than other skills.
6. If grammar is incorrect, communication is disrupted
7. My students feel insecure about foreign language use due to a lack of grammar comprehension
8. Students in my class acquire grammar comprehension cumulatively, step-by-step, in accordance with my grammar instruction.
9. The use of grammatical terminology is unnecessary in learning grammatical structures.
10. I prefer my students to discover and formulate grammar rules themselves, before I explain grammar structures explicitly.
11. Students in my class acquire the language cumulatively, step-by-step, in accordance with my instruction on the different language skills (reading, listening etc.).
12. I prefer my students to learn to correct their own mistakes.
13. I discuss mistakes made by individuals in a larger group or classroom context.
14. My students are allowed to sacrifice grammatical accuracy if this leads to immediate communicative effectiveness.
15. My students' language competence is mainly evaluated on fluency rather than on grammatical accuracy.
16. Second language study is mainly important for students who wish to communicate in international contexts.

## 2.2 Subjects and School Context

In this study, the demographic criteria included were nationality and teaching qualification.

The English teachers had to be educated at a certain level in order to participate in this study; they had to be *specialists*. According to a study on language teaching in Europe, the specialist is defined as “[someone] qualified to teach two different subjects, one of which is a foreign language, or qualified solely to teach foreign languages” (EACEA P9 Eurydice: 2008). In total, 22 English teachers participated who teach at German *Gymnasium* level. To compare two different school systems, it was important that teachers taught at a similar level in both countries. It was strictly necessary that all teachers participating were teaching at a *Gymnasium*, or in Holland, *VWO* level. No further differentiation was made between school types. Moreover, no distinction was made between different federal states across Germany. In Germany, foreign language education policies vary according to the federal states. “Although education is a state matter, there is more harmony between the approaches to ELT at *Gymnasium* in two different states than between ELT at a *Gymnasium* and a *Realschule* in the same state” (Ehlerding 139). In the Netherlands, 32 English teachers participated who teach at *VWO* or *Gymnasium* level. In the Netherlands, the distinction between *VWO* and *Gymnasium* is that students who choose *Gymnasium* opt for additional classes in Latin and/or Greek. The teaching of English, however, is at the same level. Both the German *Gymnasium* and the Dutch *VWO* and *Gymnasium* prepare students for higher education, or scientific education at university level.

It was more difficult to find enough teachers willing to fill out the questionnaire than anticipated. In Holland, most questionnaires were collected through the use of a forum for

teachers of English. In Germany, the present researcher contacted personal acquaintances.

### 3. Results and Analysis

#### 3.1 Attitudes of Dutch and German participants

**Table 1:** Results of Dutch and German participants

	German		Dutch		p
	average	S. D.	average	S.D.	
<b>Statement 1</b>	2.5	1.01	2.22	1.21	0.37
<b>Statement 2</b>	2.82	0.91	3.31	1.20	0.11
<b>Statement 3</b>	1.91	0.81	2.19	0.93	0.26
<b>Statement 4</b>	3.81	0.75	3.88	0.87	0.78
<b>Statement 5</b>	3.36	0.95	3.63	1.04	0.35
<b>Statement 6</b>	3.23	0.97	3.29	0.74	0.79
<b>Statement 7</b>	3.23	1.15	3.56	0.88	0.23
<b>Statement 8</b>	2.77	0.97	2.5	0.84	0.277
<b>Statement 9</b>	3.68	0.72	3.52	1.03	0.52
<b>Statement 10</b>	2.55	0.91	2.78	0.91	0.35
<b>Statement 11</b>	2.55	0.67	2.61	1.02	0.79
<b>Statement 12</b>	2.05	0.79	1.97	0.65	0.70
<b>Statement 13</b>	2.64	0.85	2.38	0.68	0.23
<b>Statement 14</b>	1.86	0.56	2.5	0.97	0.01
<b>Statement 15</b>	2.82	0.66	2.94	0.84	0.58
<b>Statement 16</b>	3.45	1.06	3.34	1.31	0.74
<b>Average 1-16</b>	2.83		2.91		

The averages and standard deviations of the German and Dutch teachers can be found in Table 1. For each statement, the averages lie very close to each other. For the most part, the Dutch score higher in their averages, but the difference is relatively small. The statement with the widest gap between the averages (statement 14) is also the statement with the lowest p-value, and is the only statistically significant one. A t-test was done to determine whether or not there were significant differences between the two groups of respondents. The p-value was calculated by means of a t-test. The p-value of Statement 14 was 0.01.

14: My students are allowed to sacrifice grammatical accuracy if this leads to immediate communicative effectiveness.

The German teachers score an average of 1.9 and the Dutch teachers an average of 2.5. This means that the Dutch teachers are in greater agreement with this statement, which is based on CLT principles. Dutch teachers seem more concerned with communication than with correct grammar.

For most statements, the p-value is greater than 0.5, which means the results are not significant. The high p values indicate that the likelihood that the two categories are different from each other is due to chance alone. Thus, any differences between German and Dutch teachers regarding the principles of language teaching proposed in the questionnaire will not be further discussed. However, this does not mean that there is no difference in attitude between Dutch and German teachers towards the communicative approach. Differences between the teachers' attitudes were simply not demonstrated in this research. A possible explanation for the limitations of this study is that the population tested was not homogenous. First of all, the criteria for the participants were that the participants teach English at Dutch

*VWO/Gymnasium* level or at a German *Gymnasium*. However, in retrospect, each school may have had a different school philosophy. A school may be more progressive in its approach to relatively new teaching methods, such as the communicative approach. The school environment could affect the participants' thinking. Participants, moreover, may have had their own individual teaching philosophies. For instance, if many of the participants were of an older generation, there is considerable chance that they were more conservative. However, the participants were not required to give their age. Likewise, it is likely that those who have just started their school careers are less conventional. The teachers could rank their years of teaching experience (< 5 years, >5 <10 years, and >10 years); the results can be found in Table 2. Dutch teachers participating in this study have more years of experience in comparison to the German teachers. If the years of teaching experience were more equally balanced between the two countries, then it would be possible to analyse the question of whether the teachers' attitude is related to their years of teaching experience.

**Table 2:** Years of Teaching Experience

Years of Teaching Experience	German	Dutch
< 5	10	5
> 5 < 10	4	4
> 10	8	23

### 3.2 Attitudes of Dutch and German males

#### Gender Distribution

The impact of the teachers' gender was also examined. Once more, t-test was used to calculate the p value. As seen below, there are some results that are statistically significant for the males. The difference between the Dutch and German females was not statistically significant. In fact, in this study, it is not evident that the Dutch females were in greater agreement with the CLT statements than the German females.

**Table 3:** Dutch and German males

Men	German		Dutch		p
	average	S. D.	average	S.D.	
<b>Statement 1</b>	2.57	0.98	2.6	1.51	0.97
<b>Statement 2</b>	2.71	0.499	3.6	1.07	0.04
<b>Statement 3</b>	1.71	0.49	2.5	1.08	0.09
<b>Statement 4</b>	3.71	0.49	3.7	1.06	0.97
<b>Statement 5</b>	3.71	0.76	3.5	0.97	0.63
<b>Statement 6</b>	2.71	1.11	3.2	0.79	0.31
<b>Statement 7</b>	3.14	0.90	3.14	3.5	0.42
<b>Statement 8</b>	3	0.82	2.3	0.95	0.13
<b>Statement 9</b>	3.57	0.53	4	0.44	0.02
<b>Statement 10</b>	3	0.82	3	1.15	1
<b>Statement 11</b>	2.43	0.53	2.43	2.9	0.35
<b>Statement 12</b>	2.43	0.98	2.2	0.92	0.63
<b>Statement 13</b>	2.71	0.95	2.56	0.88	0.74



<b>Statement 14</b>	1.57	0.53	2.6	1.07	0.02
<b>Statement 15</b>	2.86	0.69	2.7	0.95	0.71
<b>Statement16</b>	3.29	1.11	3.7	1.25	0.49
<b>Average st. 1-16</b>	2.82		2.98		

In **Table 2.** the data represent the answers given by 10 Dutch and 7 German males.

For the males, the difference is significant for the following statement:

“2. Foreign language study is mainly necessary to sharpen cognitive skills; it is helpful for mastering practical learning skills.”

The p value for Statement 2 is 0.04. The rating scale used in the questionnaire specified 5 for ‘strongly agree’ and 1 for ‘strongly disagree’. A relatively high Dutch average for Item 2 (3.6) indicates that these teachers agree with the idea that students should learn languages to learn to master the skill of learning *how* to learn a language. German teachers, however, more strongly disagree with the statement. They score an average of 2.7. This would suggest that they appear to value the conventional perspective to learning foreign languages: to communicate in foreign contexts.

“9. The use of grammatical terminology is unnecessary in learning grammatical structures.”

The p value for Statement 9 is 0.02. The German average was 3.57 and the Dutch average was 4. The Dutch teachers seem to find the use of grammatical terminology of lesser

importance than the German teachers. The metalanguage used to sometimes explain grammar is not always necessary to learn to master a foreign language. Especially for those with learning difficulties, this analytical approach to language teaching, can be found too complex (Widodo 127).

“14. My students are allowed to sacrifice grammatical accuracy if this leads to immediate communicative effectiveness.”

The p value for statement 14 is 0.02. The average for Dutch males is 2.6, and the average for German males is 1.57. The German teachers seem more hesitant than the Dutch teachers to adapt the CLT view that grammar is far less important to being able to communicate. CLT principles, however, propose that when there is too much emphasis on the form of the language, it can slow down the actual use, output, of the language (Savage 7).

### ***3.3 Attitudes of Dutch and German Females***

The difference between the Dutch and German females was not significant. In this study, 15 German and 22 Dutch females participated. When these two female groups are compared, however, the p values for all items are not significant. This data will therefore not be further analysed. One marginally significant item, however, may bring further insight into the females' attitude to CLT. Item 9 has a p-value of 0.10.

“9. The use of grammatical terminology is unnecessary in learning grammatical structures.”

The average of the Dutch females is 3.23 and the average of the German females is 3.68. Even though the difference between the two groups is relatively small, it can be said that the German females are in greater agreement to the statement than the Dutch females.

**Table 3.** Results of Dutch and German Females

Women	German		Dutch		P
	average	S. D.	average	S.D.	
<b>Statement 1</b>	1.21	1.06	2.22	1.21	0.50
<b>Statement 2</b>	2.87	1.06	3.18	1.26	0.43
<b>Statement 3</b>	2	0.93	2.05	0.84	0.88
<b>Statement 4</b>	3.86	0.86	3.95	0.79	0.73
<b>Statement 5</b>	3.2	1.01	3.68	1.09	0.18
<b>Statement 6</b>	3.47	0.83	3.33	0.73	0.61
<b>Statement 7</b>	3.27	1.28	3.59	0.91	0.37
<b>Statement 8</b>	2.77	0.97	2.59	0.80	0.50
<b>Statement 9</b>	3.68	0.72	3.23	1.07	0.10
<b>Statement 10</b>	2.33	0.90	2.68	0.78	0.22
<b>Statement 11</b>	2.6	0.74	2.48	0.93	0.67
<b>Statement 12</b>	1.87	0.64	1.86	0.47	0.99
<b>Statement 13</b>	2.6	0.83	2.3	0.57	0.21
<b>Statement 14</b>	2	0.53	2.45	0.94	0.11
<b>Statement 15</b>	2.8	0.68	2.8	3.05	0.33
<b>Statement 16</b>	3.53	1.06	3.18	1.33	0.40
<b>Average st. 1-16</b>	2.75		2.85		

All in all, this study shows more clearly that there are differences in CLT attitudes that cannot clearly be linked to ethnic background; however, these attitudes are shaped rather by the participants' sex. In fact, there are more statements that are statistically significant when the

Dutch and German males are compared to each other than when all the participants' attitudes (male and female) are compared. The difference between the Dutch and German males is that the average of the statistically significant statements shows that Dutch teachers have a more positive disposition towards CLT.

There have been other studies that investigated whether a teacher's gender shaped his or her CLT attitude. A study done in Taiwan shows that factors such as teacher's workload, part-or full-time positions, and her or his gender has an impact on teachers' perception of CLT (cf. Pan, 2008). A similar study also shows how teachers from Jordan had differing beliefs about CLT practices that were, partially, attributed to gender. Thus, characteristics such as gender can be influential for a teacher's perspective on CLT. In this study the female participants' attitudes cannot be compared to the males. However, there are studies in which teachers' attitudes on CLT does not differ significantly (cf. Seedhouse, 1997)

#### 4. Concluding Discussion

The results found in this study show that there were several attitudinal differences between the Dutch and German participants that were significant. The Germans disagree more strongly with the idea that communicative effectiveness is more important than the grammatical form a message takes; the Germans score an average of 1.86 and the Dutch score an average of 2.5. Thus, the Dutch participants were in greater agreement with the statement based on the CLT philosophy than the teachers from Germany. However, with too little evidence found in this study, the hypothesis was not confirmed.

Hypothesis: Dutch teachers of English are disposed towards the communicative language teaching approach, in comparison to German teachers of English.

As seen earlier, a comparison of the males' attitudes shows that the German males respond less favorably to statements based on the CLT philosophy than the Dutch males. In fact, there is a clear difference between the category 'Dutch males' and the category 'German males', more so than the overall difference between the Dutch participants and German participants. For this study, this may suggest that ethnic background does not necessarily determine teachers' attitudes to CLT. In fact, the significant results of the Dutch and German males indicate that gender has an impact on the perception of CLT.

Whether there are significant gender-related differences is, from a broader perspective, also interesting for what it says about gender roles in society. In fact, in one of the relatively few studies conducted on how a teacher's gender impacts CLT beliefs, it is argued that these "gender roles are strongly influenced by culture and contexts" (Rieger 108). In fact, teachers' attitudes towards certain language teaching methodologies, such as the communicative language approach, may underline cultural norms and expectations. Further analysis of teachers' attitudes from two different environments, such as Germany and the Netherlands, is

highly recommended in order to understand intercultural differences between males and females and the communicative approach.

All in all, one of the issues this exploratory study has discussed is that many variables, such as gender, can influence a teacher's attitude. "[A]ttitude change is an essential and inevitable part of any pedagogical innovation" (Karavas-Doukas 188). If, in the long run, teachers want to embrace the CLT philosophy because they see many practical benefits of this approach, it is important to further study teachers' personal ideas on CLT. In fact, teachers will inevitably try to grasp new teaching theories "in light of their own theories, and will tend to translate innovative ideas to conform with their own style of teaching" (Karavas-Doukas 188).

Moreover, studying teacher attitudes is also relevant, for these can determine how motivated a teacher is to make curricular changes in the classroom (Stuart 56). Thus, on the whole, it may be said that teachers' attitudes are highly relevant to determine what teaching approaches the teacher takes.

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