



# A Comparative Study of The Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching In Second Language Teaching

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**How to cite this paper:** Tang, T. T. (2026). A comparative study of the audiolingual method and communicative language teaching in second language teaching. *Education and Social Work*, 4(2), 1–10. ISSN Print: 3079-515X; ISSN Online: 3079-5168. <https://doi.org/10.63313/ESW.9124>  
**Published: 2026-05-06**

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## Abstract

This study aims to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of the application of the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in second language instruction. It will examine the similarities and differences between these two teaching approaches in terms of their theoretical foundations, instructional objectives, pedagogical principles, teaching methodologies, classroom procedures, and assessment systems. The research will further explore their respective strengths and limitations in second language teaching contexts, so as to provide valuable references and insights for pedagogical practice. Ultimately, this study seeks to promote the optimization and innovation of second language teaching methodologies and enhance learning outcomes.

## Keywords

Audio-Lingual Method (ALM); Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Second Language Instruction; Comparative Study

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

With the acceleration of globalization, the importance of second language learning and instruction has become increasingly prominent. Among various second language teaching methodologies, the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as two influential approaches, have played significant roles in different historical periods and educational contexts. Understanding the characteristics and distinctions between these two methodologies is crucial for making informed selections of appropriate second language teaching approaches, enhancing instructional quality, and improving learning outcomes.

### 1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

### **1.2.1. Purpose of the Study**

Through a comparative study of the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), this research can uncover the strengths and limitations of both methodologies in terms of theoretical foundations and pedagogical practices. This analysis will provide theoretical and practical guidance for second language teachers in making informed methodological selections. At the same time, it can contribute to enriching and refining the theoretical framework of second language instruction while driving innovation in teaching approaches. And it can also offer valuable references for second language learners to understand distinctive features of different methodologies and select personalized learning strategies.

### **1.2.2. Significance of the Study**

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) across multiple dimensions of second language instruction, including theoretical foundations, instructional objectives, pedagogical principles, methodological approaches, classroom procedures, assessment systems. Through rigorous examination of these facets, the research will elucidate fundamental divergences and intrinsic interrelations between the two methodologies. Ultimately, it seeks to provide context-specific and actionable recommendations to enhance second language instructional practices.

## **2. Theoretical Basis**

### **2.1. Theoretical Basis of ALM**

The Audio-lingual Method is the perfect amalgamation of American structuralist linguistic theory and behaviorist psychological theory. Charles C. Fries particularly emphasized the importance of “context” when discussing theories of language communication and language teaching. He contended that native speakers of the same language face considerable difficulty in fully comprehending each other’s intended meaning, primarily due to a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the specific circumstances in which the native language is used (Yang, 2000). In other words, the Audio-lingual Method also emphasizes conveying meaning through situational contexts (Huang, 2015).

#### **2.1.1. Behaviorist Psychology**

The psychological foundation of the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) lies in behaviorist psychology, pioneered by Watson and Skinner in the United States during the 1930s. This school posits that language acquisition constitutes a habit formation process. Through the mechanism of stimulus, response, and reinforcement, learners develop correct linguistic reflexes via repetitive practice. Naturally, this principle applies equally to human language learning. ALM emerged accordingly as a pedagogical

embodiment of this psychological theory: teachers provide systematic stimuli to elicit student responses, enabling behavioral reinforcement through continuous practice until target language habits become automatic (Guo, 1993).

### **2.1.2. Structural Linguistics**

Structural linguistics, which examines language as a system comprising phonological, lexical, and grammatical components, provides the framework for the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) to pedagogically deconstruct language into discrete structural units. ALM systematically teaches these elements-phonemes, vocabulary, and syntactic patterns-through scaffolded progression, enabling learners to internalize linguistic rules and ultimately produce structurally accurate utterances for communicative purposes.

Structural linguistics forms the direct theoretical basis for ALM. Consequently, language acquisition must commence with fundamental oral proficiency, as exemplified by native language acquisition beginning with childhood speech. Integrating behaviorist psychology with structural linguistics, Princeton linguist William Moulton formalized ALM's core principles: language is fundamentally speech rather than writing; a system of habits acquired through practice rather than metalinguistic knowledge; defined by native speaker usage rather than artificial prescriptions; and characterized by cross-linguistic variation. This synthesis provided ALM's coherent theoretical framework (Guo, 1993).

## **2.2. Theoretical Basis of CLT**

In the early 1970s, American linguist Dell Hymes pioneered the Communicative Approach, designed to develop learners' communicative competence through language instruction. Originally conceived to address structural limitations and pragmatic deficiencies in traditional teaching methods, this pedagogical framework fundamentally aims to cultivate students' communicative abilities through a function-based syllabus (Brown, 2000).

### **2.2.1. Sociolinguistics**

Sociolinguistics emphasizes the intrinsic connection between language and social contexts, positing that language functions not merely as a communicative tool but also as a sociocultural vehicle. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) prioritizes developing learners' ability to utilize language for information exchange and emotional expression within authentic social interactions, enabling students to comprehend the cultural backgrounds and societal meanings embedded in linguistic usage. For instance, teachers may facilitate group discussions or scenario-based dialogues to engage students in simulated real-world contexts, thereby enhancing communicative competence.

### **2.2.2. Humanistic Psychology and Psycholinguistics**

The psychological theoretical foundation of the Communicative Approach lies in humanistic psychology and psycholinguistics, with Noam Chomsky as a key representative. Chomsky's theory of innate language faculty contends that humans possess an inherent "Language Acquisition Device (LAD)"-a universal grammar mechanism within the brain. Consequently, language teaching should focus on activating and refining this innate "language acquisition device" in learners' minds. The Communicative Approach emerges as the seamless integration of sociolinguistics, humanistic psychology, and psycholinguistics. Linguists Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers (1986) analyzed communicative language features, asserting that this approach originates from the principle that "language is communication." They unanimously regard communicative competence as language's most fundamental function, with the primary objective of cultivating students' communicative abilities.

### **3. Comparative Analysis Between ALM and CLT**

#### **3.1. Comparative Analysis of Theoretical Basis**

The Audiolingual Method, based on behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics, emphasizes the mastery of language structures and the formation of linguistic habits.

In contrast, the Communicative Language Teaching approach, grounded in sociolinguistics, humanistic psychology and psycholinguistics, focuses on the communicative functions of language and the cultivation of practical language skills. These fundamental theoretical differences thus lead to significant distinctions between the two teaching methods in terms of teaching objectives, principles, and methodologies.

#### **3.2. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Objectives**

##### **3.2.1. Teaching Objectives of the Audiolingual Method (ALM)**

Linguistic knowledge enables students to accurately master foundational elements (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) and develop automatized linguistic habits, such as correct pronunciation, proficient use of common vocabulary and syntactic structures in sentence construction and translation drills. Language skills prioritizes listening and speaking proficiency. Students comprehend teacher directives, simple dialogues, or passages, and produce fluent, accurate oral responses (e.g., Q&A exchanges, text recitation, structured conversations). Literacy skills, such as reading and writing skills, receive minimal emphasis.

##### **3.2.2. Teaching Objectives of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

Firstly, CLT positions the development of communicative competence as the primary objective of foreign language instruction, adopting a more tolerant stance toward linguistic accuracy than structural approaches. Its core emphasis lies in

meaning-focused communication, specifically prioritizing interpretative comprehension, expressive production, and negotiation of meaning within interactive discourse (Li, 2001). Students adapt linguistic resources to varied settings, interlocutors, and purposes for effective information exchange and emotional expression. Secondly, linguistic knowledge delivers needs-driven instruction in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse systems, prioritizing functional application over rote memorization. For example, learners learn grammatical rules through discourse analysis and generate contextually accurate utterances to fulfill communicative needs (Li, 2001).

### **3.2.3. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Objectives in CLT and ALM**

By comparison, it is evident that the Audio-lingual Method focuses on repetitive drilling of sentence patterns to cultivate students' listening and speaking abilities, whereas the Communicative Approach prioritizes practical language usage with the goal of developing students' communicative competence (Zhang, 2007). The Audio-lingual Method emphasizes training in listening and speaking skills but neglects reading and writing development. Its pattern drills tend to be overly mechanical and lack authentic contexts. In contrast, the Communicative Approach prioritizes fostering students' communicative abilities and addressing their practical needs, yet to some extent overlooks linguistic accuracy and precision. Additionally, the selection of communicative content can be highly subjective and arbitrary (Huang, 2015).

## **3.3. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Principles**

### **3.3.1. Principles of the Audiolingual Method (ALM)**

First, the Listening-Speaking Primacy Principle. This emphasizes "listening before speaking," developing students' auditory comprehension and oral expression through extensive auditory input and imitation exercises. For example, teachers begin lessons by playing recordings or providing oral demonstrations, allowing students to repeatedly listen and imitate before engaging in speaking practice such as shadowing or dialogue drills.

Second, the Gradual Progression Principle. Teachers sequence instruction according to linguistic complexity, starting with simple phonetics, vocabulary, and sentence patterns before advancing to complex structures and discourse. This enables students to build foundational knowledge progressively. For instance, instruction begins with basic nouns, verbs, and adjectives, progresses to subject-verb-object structures, then gradually introduces compound and complex sentences.

Third, the Repetition and Reinforcement Principle. Teachers consolidate students' mastery through repetitive drills and reinforcement exercises. Techniques include imitation, substitution drills, and pattern practice to develop automatic language responses. For example, students repeatedly practice substitutions within a

sentence frame (e.g., “I like apples. I like bananas. I like oranges.”) to internalize structural patterns.

### **3.3.2. Principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

Firstly, the Communicative Principle. Instruction centers on authentic communication, prioritizing practical language use. Activities must reflect real-world contexts-such as role-playing restaurant ordering or shopping scenarios-to develop genuine interaction skills through dialogues and simulations.

Secondly, the Student-Centered Principle. Teachers facilitate active student engagement by encouraging autonomous, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning. Acting as guides and supporters, they design group discussions and project-based tasks where students solve problems collectively, enhancing both language skills and teamwork abilities.

Thirdly, the Contextualization Principle. Language is learned within meaningful contexts to help students grasp usage and meaning. Teachers integrate linguistic knowledge with real-world situations-for example, teaching vocabulary through dialogues or texts rather than isolated word lists-enabling flexible application across communicative scenarios.

### **3.3.3. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Principles in CLT and ALM**

ALM adheres to principles such as listening-speaking primacy, gradual progression, and repetition-reinforcement, emphasizing the systematic acquisition and incremental accumulation of linguistic knowledge. In contrast, CLT centers on principles of communicative focus, student-centeredness, and contextualization, prioritizing proactive student engagement in authentic communicative activities and the practical application of language skills. CLT thus underscores the functional utility and situational relevance of language learning.

## **3.4. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Methods**

### **3.4.1. Audiolingual Method (ALM) Techniques**

First of all, Mimicry Technique. Students imitate the teacher’s or audio recordings’ pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm for speech drills. For example, the teacher reads sentences aloud phrase-by-phrase while students shadow-repeat, refining phonetic accuracy and natural flow.

Second, Substitution Drills. After mastering a sentence pattern, students replace lexical elements to internalize structures, such as using the frame “I like...”, students substitute nouns (“I like reading/swimming/music”) through systematic repetition.

Third, Pattern Practice Drills. Mechanical exercises including repetition, substitution, and transformation foster automaticity, such as converting affirmative sentences (“He is a student”) to negative (“He isn’t a student”) or interrogative forms (“Is he a student?”).

### 3.4.2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Techniques

First, Situational Teaching Method. Authentic or simulated contexts enable pragmatic language use, such as role-playing customer-clerk dialogues in a mock store setting to practice shopping expressions.

Second, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Language becomes a tool for completing collaborative tasks, such as conducting surveys about hobbies-designing questionnaires, interviewing peers, analyzing data, and presenting findings-to develop communicative competence.

Third, Cooperative Learning. Small-group collaboration promotes peer interaction and problem-solving. For example, Groups discuss textual themes or linguistic challenges, then present insights collectively, enhancing both collaborative skills and language application.

### 3.4.3. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Methods in CLT and ALM

ALM primarily employs mechanical drilling techniques such as mimicry, substitution drills, and pattern practice, often resulting in monotonous lessons that may constrain student motivation and initiative. In contrast, CLT utilizes diverse, interactive approaches-including situational teaching, task-based language teaching (TBLT), and cooperative learning-which stimulate learner interest, enhance active engagement and collaborative skills, and ultimately cultivate comprehensive language proficiency.

## 3.5. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Procedures

### 3.5.1. Teaching Procedures of ALM

This represents a fundamental distinction between the Audio-lingual Method and the Communicative Approach. In the Audio-lingual Method, the teacher first introduces new linguistic knowledge (primarily sentence patterns) to students, followed by pattern drilling exercises. Only after extensive drilling has formed automatized responses are students expected to select vocabulary and structures from their acquired knowledge to express ideas or describe specific scenarios, situations, or events (Guo, 1993).

Step 1: Presentation phase. The teacher introduces new linguistic elements (e.g., vocabulary, sentence patterns) using visual aids, realia, or demonstrations, such as displaying an apple image to teach the word “apple” and modeling its usage in a sentence (“This is an apple”).

Step 2: Drill phase. Students engage in mechanical pattern practice-including mimicry, substitution drills, and transformation exercises-to reinforce knowledge, such as, substituting pronouns in the frame “\_ is a student” (“I/He/She am/is a student”) through repetitive drills.

Step 3: Application phase. Learners apply knowledge in controlled communicative tasks. For example, Paired dialogues using learned greetings or self-introductions to

practice oral production.

### **3.5.2. Teaching Procedures of CLT**

In contrast, the instructional sequence of the Communicative Approach is entirely different, including activating communication using existing linguistic resources, introducing new language items necessary for more effective communication, and conducting targeted practice of specific elements (Hu, 1982).

During lessons, teachers organize communicative activities through various means, with instructional content being driven by students' authentic needs.

Step 1: Lead-in phase. Activating interest through topic-based discussions, questions, or multimedia, such as showing food-related videos to spark curiosity before a restaurant role-play lesson.

Step 2: Contextual presentation. Introducing language within authentic scenarios, such as, playing a restaurant ordering video to demonstrate target phrases (“menu,” “order,” “How would you like your steak done?”) in situ.

Step 3: Practice phase. Conducting communicative activities (role-plays, group discussions), such as simulating restaurant interactions where students act as customers/servers to apply ordering expressions.

Step 4: Feedback and evaluation phase. Providing corrective feedback and formative assessment through teacher guidance, self-assessment, or peer review to refine language use.

### **3.5.3. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Procedures in CLT and ALM**

ALM follows a fixed three-stage sequence-presentation, drill, and application-prioritizing systematic knowledge transmission and pattern practice. Conversely, CLT implements a four-phase cyclical framework (Lead-in, Contextual Presentation, Practice, Feedback & Evaluation), emphasizing procedural integrity and interactive engagement. CLT thus prioritizes students' pragmatic application in authentic contexts alongside teachers' immediate scaffolding through formative feedback.

## **3.6. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Evaluation**

### **3.6.1. ALM Evaluation**

It primarily focuses on evaluating students' mastery of language knowledge and skills, such as the accuracy of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as their proficiency in listening and speaking. For example, students' pronunciation accuracy and oral expression abilities are assessed through their performance in imitation, sentence pattern drills, and oral question-answering. Written assignments and tests are used to evaluate students' grasp of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

It is mainly teacher-centered and relatively monolithic. Teachers evaluate students'

learning outcomes based on their classroom performance, homework completion, and test scores. For instance, teachers grade students based on the accuracy and fluency of their performance in sentence pattern drills, or assess their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar through written tests.

### **3.6.2. CLT Evaluation**

It emphasizes evaluating students' comprehensive language use abilities, including language knowledge, language skills, communicative strategies, and cultural awareness. It not only focuses on the accuracy of language expression but also on fluency, appropriateness, and flexibility in real communication. For example, when assessing students' oral abilities, not only their pronunciation and grammatical accuracy are considered, but also whether they can use appropriate language for communication and effectively employ communicative strategies to solve problems in communication.

It adopts a diversified approach, including teacher evaluation, self-assessment by students, peer assessment, and portfolio evaluation. Teacher evaluation focuses on observing and recording students' performance in classroom activities and assignments. Self-assessment and peer assessment encourage students to participate in the evaluation process, reflect on their own learning and their peers' performance, and promote self-development and mutual learning. Portfolio evaluation, on the other hand, collects students' learning works and records to comprehensively display their learning process and progress.

### **3.6.3. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Evaluation in CLT and ALM**

ALM prioritizes assessing mastery of linguistic knowledge and discrete skills through singular, teacher-centered evaluation, employing conventional assessment tools. In contrast, CLT implements comprehensive evaluation of students' integrated language proficiency, utilizing diverse assessment criteria and multi-modal methods to holistically and objectively capture learners' developmental progress.

## **4. Conclusion**

This comparative study of ALM and CLT in second language pedagogy reveals fundamental divergences in theoretical foundations, instructional objectives, teaching principles, methodologies, procedures, and evaluation systems. While ALM demonstrates relative efficacy in cultivating linguistic knowledge and listening-speaking skills, it overlooks communicative competence and literacy development. Conversely, CLT prioritizes holistic language proficiency in authentic contexts, effectively stimulating learner motivation, enhancing communicative abilities, and fostering collaborative capacities.

In second language (L2) pedagogy, educators should strategically select and integrate teaching methodologies based on instructional objectives, content, learner

profiles, and contextual factors. A synergistic implementation of ALM and CLT - leveraging their complementary strengths-is recommended. Firstly, at the stage of foundational knowledge, teachers can utilize ALM techniques (e.g., imitation drills, patterned substitution) to establish core linguistic accuracy in phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. Secondly, proficiency development stage. Teachers can employ CLT approaches, such as situational teaching, TBLT, Cooperative learning, to create authentic communicative contexts where students apply target language skills, thereby enhancing comprehensive proficiency.

In conclusion, both ALM and CLT have distinct strengths and limitations. Excessive reliance on Audio-lingual drills or premature adoption of Communicative techniques impedes second language acquisition: Audio-lingual training often yields rigid language application, while Communicative instruction may foster inaccurate usage. Teachers should therefore judiciously integrate both methods, adapting their approach based on practical classroom needs, teaching experience, and learner variables (e.g., age, personality). This balanced flexibility optimizes learning outcomes.

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