

The Evaluation of Communicative Language Teaching

Sijia Wang

China West Normal University, Sichuan, China

Abstract

This paper briefly explain the application of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in China and discuss the CLT from the perspective of its characteristics and practice in China. It aims to provide a critical analysis of CLT in language teaching of China.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching; English Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

The origins of (CLT) are to be found in the changes in the British language teaching tradition dating from the late 1960s. With the publication of the two books written by Wilkens (1976) and Widdowson (1978), CLT has rapidly taken a dominant position in Britain and spread rapidly in the field of language teaching all over the world. CLT is a system and it takes language function as the key and aims to cultivate the ability to use language. Language function points at language behavior, that is, use language to tell stories, deal with things and convey ideas, such as introducing, asking, requesting, inviting, or expressing exact or inaccurate, right or wrong, agreeing or rejecting, thanking or apologizing, hoping or fearing, etc. The combination of language function and idea is called communication. The most basic function of language in society is communication, and communicative competence is the most fundamental purpose of foreign language teaching.

Although people have different understandings of the CLT, there is agreement on the three principles proposed by Richards and Rodgers (1986:72)

(1) Communicative principle: activities involving real communication stimulate learning. Communicative principle emphasizes that the goal of communicative teaching method is to make learners successful in communication. Communicative competence includes the ability to use language appropriately in a given social context, and this ability can only be gradually cultivated in real communicative activities.

(2) Task principle: meaningful activities completed with language help learning. The comprehending of task has reached a consensus that it is the core part in language teaching.

(3) Meaning principle: for learners, meaningful language activities help learning process. Brown (1994) holds the view that for foreign language teaching, significant learning is one of the recognition principles, and it is associated with the application of brain and intellect. Significant learning stresses learning by meaning rather than based on form. Once learning is associated with meaning, there is a huge correlation, so memory will be enhanced. Meaningful learning leads to long-term memory more often than rote learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on the CLT Abroad

The formation of the Communicative Approach can date back to the late 1960s among the countries of the Western European. In 1964, Hymes showed his opinion about language using that "if one wants to express with his native language, he should not only learn to master the

ways to accept and produce the language, but also needs to know the proper situation to use the language" (Hymes, 1964:168). Then in 1972, Hymes further improved his theory by first "communicative competence". Later on, Canale and Swain (1980) conducted an influential analysis of communicative competence and put forward four dimensions of it, which were grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence; in 1984, Howatt pointed out the difference between a strong and a weak version of communicative language teaching. Richard and Rodgers (2001) showed their idea about the Communicative Approach that "it mainly contained a series of concepts and theories about the language nature, language learning and language teaching" (Richard and Rodgers, 2001:171).

2.2. Development of CLT in China

There are mainly three stages of the development of CLT in China. From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, a large number of foreign linguistic theories and language teaching theories have been introduced to China because of cultural exchanges. CLT is one of the most important foreign language teaching theories introduced (Qin, 1979; Hu, 1982; Li, 1982). At the same time, some foreign language colleges and universities in China immediately tried to design teaching materials with the guidance of CLT ("CECL"). In the middle and late 1980s, the combination of syllabus and teaching materials became the most important feature of CLT research in this period, which indicates that CLT has begun to play an important role in the guiding approach of foreign language teaching in China and has further went into the practice of foreign language teaching in China (Li, 1987). In the 1990s, close connection with teaching practice became the main feature of CLT research in this period, and like how to implement CLT in courses such as grammar, literature, extensive reading and intensive reading is discussed. (Xu, 1992; Li, 1992). Since the CLT was introduced into China in the late 1970s, its basic theories and ideas have become one of the mainstream of foreign language teaching in China after research and practice, which has exerted a far-reaching influence on foreign language teaching concepts in China.

3. Characteristics

Among the characteristics of CLT that have been isolated by commentators are:

A focus on the needs of learners, and attempts to define their needs; focusing on learners' needs and attempting to define them is a crucial aspect of effective education and training. It requires learner-centered, identifying and understanding learners' needs through a needs analysis, customizing content, offering flexible delivery methods, ongoing assessment, being responsive to change, and demonstrating empathy and understanding.

An emphasis on the content of the activity, rather than on overt language learning; which involves focusing on the subject matter and using language as a tool to access, understand, and communicate the content. This approach facilitates implicit language acquisition, engages learners, and develops transferable skills.

A tendency to specify syllabuses in terms of meaning ("notional" or "semantic" syllabuses) or speech acts ("functional" syllabuses); specifying syllabuses in terms of meaning is an approach that focuses on the intended learning outcomes for learners and aims to foster a deeper understanding of concepts and ideas. It allows for flexibility in teaching and learning while ensuring alignment with standards and fostering assessment of understanding.

Encouragement and tolerance of language variation in the classroom, even to the extent of mixing mother tongue and target language use; which includes the mix of mother tongue and target language use, can have benefits for language learners. However, teachers should still work towards promoting the use of the target language as much as possible to ensure that learners develop proficiency in the language they are studying.

Individualized work, which emphasizes respect and concern for individuals to improve work efficiency and satisfaction through individual needs.

(6) Errors tolerated as a natural part of the process of language acquisition; viewing errors as learning opportunities, rather than failures, fosters a supportive and encouraging learning environment that is conducive to language growth and development.

(7) A supportive environment, to encourage guilt-free participation; a reduction or suspension of the teacher's judgmental role; learners are more likely to feel comfortable and confident in the language classroom, which promotes active participation, experimentation, and ultimately, language growth and development.

(8) Use of techniques which encourage student participation in natural environments—techniques like group work, pair work, simulations, and information-gap exercises can effectively promote active involvement and enhance language skills in such environments.

(9) Presentation of language items in contexts of typical use rather than in isolation; this method helps learners understand the purpose and function of language structures and vocabulary in real-world communication.

(10) Materials which are either "authentic" (i.e., not originally intended for language teaching at all), or which simulate authenticity; it is crucial to consider how these materials can effectively facilitate language learning.

(11) For much if not all the time, a lack of prediction by the teacher of exactly what language is to be used by learners, because they will be engaged in simulated "natural" language activity—whether reading, listening, conversing, or writing. Not predicting exactly what language will be used by learners during simulated "natural" language activities supports a more authentic, spontaneous, and learner-centered language learning experience. This approach prepares learners for real-world communication and helps them develop the skills they need to use the target language effectively (Brumfit, 1987:5-6).

4. Practical Difficulty

In some ways CLT has loosened the connection with linguistics compared with some of its immediate predecessors, especially audiolingualism. Nor was "communicative teaching" marketed as a panacea. It does abound in texts that claim that CLT is not an effective means of language learning in China.

4.1. Teachers' Qualification

At present, some teachers' communicative competence is not enough to carry out CLT because the requirements for communicative competence are various. However, the current situation of teachers in China is that most of them do not possess comprehensive skills in language teaching, and most of them may not even talk to native speakers. At the same time, teachers need to be the role of counselor and organizer of classroom communication activities, which is extremely unfavorable to create "realistic" communication. On the other hand, in the CLT, teachers are not only the managers and consultants of classroom activities, but also a member of classroom communication. Therefore, compared with other teaching methods, teachers' own qualities, especially teachers' personality, often play a decisive role in the implementation of CLT. While at present, most of our teachers pay more attention to knowledge, but the harmony of learning is rarely considered to study (Gao, 1994).

4.2. Learners' Needs

According to the situation of our country, English language learning is often driven by exam-oriented education, where learners are focused on achieving high scores in standardized tests. This can conflict with the CLT. What's more, English teaching and learning are mostly carried

out in the mother tongue in class, and in most cases, learners still exchange their thoughts in Chinese after class. So learners lack the pressure and motivation to communicate in English (Dong,1994). Additionally, Most of our learners can't work with English as a tool of communication after graduation because many people around them speak Chinese to communicate. (Li and Wu, 1998).

4.3. Authenticity of Language Learning

The authenticity of language learning involves many aspects, including the authenticity of language input, learners' understanding , practice activities and the situations. It is difficult to guarantee the authenticity of language teaching in China because of the huge number of learners. n China, learners often lack exposure to authentic English language use, such as through immersion in English-speaking countries or regular interaction with native speakers. This can limit their ability to develop natural and fluent communication skills. Additionally, the use of textbooks and other teaching materials in China is often heavily influenced by the national curriculum and standardized tests, which may not always reflect authentic English language use.

4.4. Testing

Factors involved in communicative competence are interactive, so they should be combined as a whole to be tested. The communicative competence should be tested as accurately as possible. It is difficult to test because it takes up much time and resources. It can't be too specific because it will not be operational in the test. And it can't be too general because it will be unfair to learners(Liu, 1998). The requirement of future testing is to turn the explanation into reality, so the emphasis should be on the validation of testing rather than the need to explain the test(Weir, 1990).

5. Conclusion

While CLT has the potential to enhance learners' communicative competence, its implementation in China faces several practical difficulties. Overcoming these challenges requires a concerted effort from teachers, learners, government, and educators to create a more conducive environment for language learning that focuses on communication and authentic language use. For CLT, study should be addressed to solve problems in teaching. And finally, it should be used gradually and reasonably to serve English teaching.

References

- [1] Brown, H.D. Teaching by Principle: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Halt, 1994.
- [2] Brumfit C. Applied Linguistics and Communicative Language Teaching. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics. 1987; 8:5-6.
- [3] Canal, M.&M. Swain. Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approach Second Language Teaching and Testing[M]. London: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- [4] Hymes, D. Language in Culture and Society[M]. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.
- [5] Richards, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [6] Weir, J. Cyril. 1990. Communicative Language Testing. Prentice Hall International (UK) Ltd.
- [7] Widdowson, H.G. 1978. Teaching Language as Communication. Oxford University Press.
- [8] Wilkens, D.A. 1976. Notional Syllabuses. Ox-ford University Press.
- [9] Dong Xiaohong. Some Reflections on Communicative Approach[J]. Foreign Language World, 1994, (02):14-17.

- [10] Gao Shengbing. Some Issues in the Implementation of the Communicative Approach[J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1994, (03): 55-58.
- [11] Gao Shengbing. Some Issues in the Implementation of the Communicative Approach[J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1994, (03): 55-58.
- [12] Hu Wenzhong. A Preliminary Exploration of Communicative Language Teaching[J]. Foreign Languages, 1982(5).
- [13] Li Guanyi. Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching[J]. Foreign Languages, 1982(6).
- [14] Li Guochen. Characteristics of Implementing Communicative Approach in Grammar Teaching [J]. Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching, 1992(5).
- [15] Li Xiauju. A New Type of Textbook—Introduction to CECL[J]. Foreign Language World, 1987 (3). Communicative English[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1987.
- [16] Li Ying, Wu Changyong. A Report on the Successes and Failures of Communicative Approach: An Investigation of the Communicative Teaching Experiment at East China Normal University[J]. Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching, 1998, (11): 24-26.
- [17] Liu Zhengguang. Testing—An Urgent Issue in Communicative Language Teaching[J]. Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching, 1998, (06): 15-17+56.
- [18] Qin Xiaomeng. British Friends Talk about Communicative Teaching (Notes from a Visit to the UK) [J]. Foreign Languages, 1979(1).
- [19] Xu Qiang. On Communicative Approach in English Testing[J]. Modern Foreign Languages, 1992(1).