

A Comprehensive Literature Review on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

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Abstract

This literature review provides an analysis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), tracing its historical development, theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and the challenges and future directions it faces in language education. Originating in the 1970s as a response to the limitations of traditional grammar-translation methods, CLT emphasizes the development of communicative competence and the practical use of language. The review synthesizes research literature to highlight the significance of CLT in enhancing language teaching and learning and its implications for educational practices. It identifies gaps in current research and suggests future directions, including the integration of technology, intercultural communicative competence, task-based language teaching, assessment methods, contextualized teaching strategies, and teacher professional development. In China, CLT has adapted to the learning characteristics of Chinese students, enriching the theory and practice of English language teaching. Moving forward, CLT is poised to further integrate with technology and focus on cultivating learners' cross-cultural communicative competence.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Communicative Competence; Literature Review.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Research

In the 1970s, as society's needs for communicative language skills grew, traditional grammar translation methods couldn't keep up with learners' language needs. Some observed that students could produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom, then Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in response. Its theoretical basis lies in functional linguistics and sociolinguistics. It's a key method in language teaching, treating language as a tool for communication. The core idea is to learn and use language in real contexts, simulating real-life situations to boost learners' language skills. This method's rise reflects a shift in language teaching from traditional grammar translation methods to fostering communicative competence, meeting the practical needs of language learners and users during the learning process.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the field of foreign language teaching. Despite its widespread use, there are still debates and challenges surrounding the implementation of CLT, such as the balance between form-focused and meaning-focused instruction, the role of grammar in communicative language teaching, and the adaptability of CLT to diverse classroom contexts and learners. Therefore, a comprehensive literature review on CLT is essential to examine the

current state of research, identify key themes and trends, and provide insights into the strengths and limitations of this approach.

2. Historical Development of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the limitations of traditional grammar-translation methods in language teaching. It emphasizes the importance of actual language use and communicative competences, not just mastering language forms. CLT's theoretical foundation mainly draws from sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar. It believes that the core of language teaching is to instruct students on how to effectively communicate using language, rather than just mastering a set of grammar rules and vocabulary usage. CLT has undergone several phases of development. Initially emerging in the UK as a reflection on situational language teaching, it further evolved and spread in the USA and Europe. The establishment of the European Community promoted CLT development to address language barriers among member countries, enhancing the efficiency of foreign language teaching. Since the 1980s, CLT has been introduced and applied in English teaching in China. It has gone through the process of introduction, exploration, and practice, gradually adapting to the learning characteristics of Chinese students. Currently, CLT has become one of the mainstream methods for language teaching both domestically and internationally. With technological advancements, new teaching tools and methods like online learning platforms and virtual reality technology have also been integrated into communicative language teaching. Despite achieving certain successes, CLT faces challenges in actual teaching, such as teachers' insufficient understanding of CLT principles and high requirements for teachers' organizational skills and language proficiency. With further research and technological progress, CLT is expected to have broader applications and development.

Overall, the historical development of CLT can be seen as a response to the changing needs and demands of language learners, as well as a reflection of evolving philosophies and theories of language teaching and learning.

3. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Definition, Key Principles, and Characteristics

3.1. Definition of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching referred as the Communicative Approach, sometimes called notional-functional approach and functional approach (Qi Yi, 2021). It is a teaching system that centers around language functions and communicative competence to cultivate students' ability to communicate effectively. It advocates for a communicative teaching process, emphasizing that the goal of second language learning is to develop students' ability to creatively use language for communication. The foundation of CLT lies in the theory of communicative competence, initially proposed by Hymes (1972), defining communicative competence as encompassing grammatical, psychological, sociocultural, and probability judgments. In 1980, Canale and Swain's communicative competence theory enriches the ideas of Hymes, who believe that communicative competence includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

CLT builds on Hymes' theory of communicative competence and Halliday's functional linguistics theory, emphasizing the functionality of language communication. Littlewood (2011) notes that one notable characteristic of CLT is its systematic focus on language function and structure. Howatt (2004) distinguishes between "weak" and "strong" versions of CLT. "Weak version" emphasizes providing learners with communicative opportunities to master language

use and advocates integrating such activities into a broader language teaching system. On the other hand, "strong version" underscores that language is acquired through communication itself, stimulating the development of the language system. Nunan (1989) identifies five key features of CLT, including learner-centered interactive communication, integrating authentic texts in teaching, focusing on language and the learning process, incorporating learners' personal experiences into classroom learning, and linking in-class language learning with real-world language activation. Brown (2015) sees CLT as engaging in real-life communication in the classroom, with teachers viewing students as collaborative learning partners. Therefore, CLT aims to enhance students' fluency in language, not just accuracy, and to familiarize them with spontaneous language production to adapt to real-life communication.

In essence, communicative language teaching stresses language functionality and practicality, encouraging learners to develop language skills through communicative activities. The core concept of CLT is to nurture learners' language and practical communication competences, enabling them to effectively communicate using the language they have learned. This teaching method finds extensive application in the field of language education, continuously shaping the development direction of language teaching practices.

3.2. Key Principles of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching is to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication, applying the concept of communication to language learning, and it also needs to grasp several principles that need to be maintained in real-world usage. Three principles suggest by Richards and Rogers (2014): (1) Communication principle: Activities that involve real communication promote learning. (2) Task principle: Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning. (3) Meaningfulness principle: language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

By adopting these principles, language teachers can create an engaging and interactive learning environment that fosters the development of learners' communicative competence and language proficiency.

3.3. Characteristics of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching is one of the hottest research areas in English teaching, receiving high praise from a considerable number of people. Anderson pointed out that it has the following characteristics: (1) Emphasizes language use and appropriateness, rather than just focusing on language forms. (2) Some activities prioritize language fluency over accuracy. (3) Focuses on students' independence, creativity, and communication rather than just being teacher-centered. (4) Uses group and pair work for discussions, games, and specific task-solving activities. (5) Strives to use the target language in the classroom as much as possible (Xu Bing, 2005).

4. Theoretical Foundations of CLT

4.1. Chomsky's Language Acquisition Theory

In the 1950s, Chomsky introduced the concept of innate language capacity theory. He believed that native language learners have a set of grammar rules in their brains for constructing sentences, enabling them to communicate. Everyone is born with a natural talent and instinct for language learning, which is a prerequisite for applying communicative language teaching in education—that learners have the necessary foundational knowledge before learning a language. In the context of learning English as a foreign language in our country without a native or second language learning environment, it is necessary to conduct a special analysis of the

learning situation and appropriately integrate the teaching of language theory knowledge while using communicative language teaching to equip students with a certain level of language proficiency.

4.2. Hymes' Communicative Competence Theory

Hymes (1972) built upon Chomsky's theory and introduced the theory of communicative competence. According to Hymes, linguistic theory needs to be seen as part of more general theory incorporating communication and culture: whether something is formally possible; whether something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available; something is appropriate in relation to a context; something is in fact done, actually performed, and what it is doing entails. Communicative competence not only encompasses Chomsky's concept of language ability but also involves the practical application of language knowledge in communication.

4.3. Canale and Swain's Four Dimensions of Communicative Competence

Based on Hymes's concept of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a comprehensive framework of communicative competence. With his deepening understanding of language, Canale (1983) refreshed his framework from four dimensions, consisting of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

4.4. Halliday's Functional Linguistics Theory

Halliday's functional linguistics theory emphasizes the consistency between language and its use. Halliday views language as a behavioral system, also known as "behavioral potential." People use different languages in various social contexts to maintain social interactions and employ specific language behaviors in different situational contexts. Making appropriate choices from the potential meanings of various languages is language communication. The essence of language learning is learning how to express meaning; the vocabulary and grammar systems of language cannot exist separately from the system of meaning.

5. Related Researches at Home and Abroad

5.1. Related Researches at Home

Since the 1980s, China has started adopting communicative language teaching, which has gradually been widely used in English language education. In China, communicative language teaching has gone through roughly three stages: introduction, development, and innovation.

5.1.1. Introduction Stage of Communicative (1977-1986)

At this stage, the theoretical concepts were briefly introduced in domestic academic publications and journals to make the local audience aware of the emergence of a new language teaching method from abroad. But at this stage, there has not been a thorough summary and reflection combined with the current situation of foreign language teaching in our country. The theoretical research is still in the early stage of cognition, and the analysis of its concept, characteristics, and specific problems in the actual application process is not comprehensive enough. However, this new method and idea also play an important role in promoting the reform of foreign language teaching (Zou Yibing, 2019).

5.1.2. Development Stage of Communicative Language Teaching (1986-1996)

To effectively implement communicative language teaching in actual classroom instruction, China's Ministry of Education issued the Middle School English Curriculum in 1986 and the Junior High School English Curriculum in 1993. These curricula explicitly highlighted the advantages of communicative language teaching: emphasizing the development of students'

language use and communication skills. Additionally, supporting materials such as Junior English for China and Senior English for China were published and widely used across the country (Gan Shiyuan, 2017). The availability of these teaching resources facilitated the innovative research and application of communicative language teaching within China.

5.1.3. The Innovative Stage of Communicative Language Teaching (1997-present)

After stable development in the previous two stages, communicative language teaching in China has now established a solid theoretical foundation and textbook support. In the innovation stage, the research achievements of communicative language teaching mainly focus on three aspects: research methods, research content, and research subjects. There have been both progress and challenges in these areas (Zhang Huiling, 2017).

In terms of research content, Hou Jinxiang's work *The Localization Path of Western Foreign Language Teaching Methods* specifically discusses the practical approaches of communicative language teaching in China. The article points out that when practicing communicative language teaching domestically, Chinese teachers find it difficult to conduct teaching activities in the classroom effectively, failing to enhance students' language application skills (Hou Jinxiang & Xie Pengxuan, 2011). It has been proven that only by applying communicative language teaching with a personalized approach based on the principles of "correct selection" and "reasonable optimization" can the effectiveness of communicative language teaching in China be significantly improved. However, the localization research approach is still in the theoretical proposal and rationalization stage, lacking empirical research.

Regarding research methods, theoretical studies still dominate the research landscape. Li Chili's research in 2016 discovered that non-empirical studies accounted for 87.72% of all papers published from 1980 to 2015. These studies mainly focus on theoretical introductions, example analyses, and subjective teaching experience summaries, lacking qualitative personalized research primarily based on observation and interviews. Moreover, the research mainly concentrates on theoretical aspects, with many studies failing to clearly define the research subjects of communicative language teaching.

In terms of research subjects, communicative language teaching primarily targets university students or vocational college students, with minimal focus on primary and secondary school education. Wu Heping's theory suggests that research on communicative language teaching in primary and secondary schools is hindered by the research capabilities of foreign language teachers in these institutions, as well as objective constraints. The vast differences in scale, urban-rural gaps, and significant disparities in student and teacher levels in primary and secondary schools in China make it challenging to form unified conclusions (Xiao Lixin, 2011). With the increasing emphasis on basic education in primary and secondary schools, especially in English as a fundamental subject, strengthening the practical research on communicative language teaching in primary and secondary schools is crucial.

Since its introduction to China, communicative language teaching has undergone continuous localization transformations and now aligns well with the learning characteristics of Chinese students.

5.2. Related Researches Abroad

Foreign research on communicative language teaching primarily focuses on theoretical innovation. According to its theoretical development stages, communicative language teaching can be divided into three stages: the proposal of communicative competence, the emergence of functional syllabi, and further development of communicative language teaching:

5.2.1. Proposal of Communicative Competence

Chomsky first proposed in 1957 that language has unique and creative characteristics. Building on this, Chomsky introduced the concepts of "linguistic competence" and "linguistic

performance" in 1965. "Linguistic competence" emphasizes knowledge of language itself, while "linguistic performance" emphasizes the application of language (Chomsky, 2002). In 1972, Hymes officially introduced the concept of communicative approach, emphasizing that language, as systematic knowledge, should not only emphasize knowledge of grammar structures but also the application of language as a communicative tool. Hymes pointed out that communicative competence in language is influenced by various factors such as the grammar structure of the language itself, the psychological state of the user, and societal factors, showcasing the user's comprehensive abilities (Hymes, 1972). Based on this theory, Hymes formally proposed the concept of communicative language teaching, aiming to help learners master communicative competence through practical communication methods.

5.2.2. Emergence of Functional Syllabi

After the proposal of communicative language teaching, it encountered a historical opportunity for its own development. By the late 1970s, traditional teaching methods were facing significant challenges from innovative language teaching methods. Communicative language teaching seized this great historical period and achieved its own substantial development. Wilkins' Notional Syllabus published in 1972, systematically outlined the various limitations faced by traditional teaching in actual teaching. To ensure the effective implementation of communicative language teaching, it required both parties in the dialogue to continuously exchange roles during actual conversations, providing opportunities for both to participate in language input and output, emphasizing a cooperative mindset (Wilkins, 1974). In 1978, Widdowson's work *Communicative Language Teaching* took language analysis as its starting point, analyzing and summarizing the principles and practical experiences followed in communicative language teaching, laying the foundation for its development. That same year, John Munby designed a syllabus for educators who widely used communicative language teaching. Brumfit and Johnson jointly published the first monograph on communicative language teaching *Communicative Method of Language Teaching* in 1979. Since then, communicative language teaching has entered a phase of rapid development and gradually matured (Brumfit, 1979).

5.2.3. Further Development of Communicative Language Teaching

After nearly a decade of development, communicative language teaching matured in the 1980s. In 1980, based on the outline of communicative language teaching, M. Canale and M. Swain jointly proposed four language learning competences: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. They pointed out that language learning is not just about pronunciation, grammar, or sentence structure, but about organizing and understanding entire texts, emphasizing the social nature of language (Canale, Swain, 1980). The following year, Littlewood noted that communicative language teaching had become a crucial part of international foreign language teaching activities, reiterating that communication competences in language are paramount (Littlewood, 2011). In the same year, Johnson and Morrow co-published *Communication in the Classroom*, clearly outlining the basic principles of communicative language teaching, providing theoretical guidance for teachers' instruction. Over the next dozen years, including many linguists such as Richards, Bachman, and Skehan, combined with teachers' practical experiences, gradually refined the theoretical framework of communicative language teaching, making outstanding contributions to the maturity of communicative language teaching.

Throughout this evolutionary process, communicative language teaching has absorbed the essence of other theories, enriching its own theoretical content. As a result, communicative language teaching has become an essential component of foreign language teaching worldwide.

6. Challenges and Future Research Directions in CLT

6.1. The Challenges and Issues Faced in the Promotion of CLT

Although CLT has achieved certain effectiveness both domestically and internationally, it also faces some issues and challenges in actual teaching. In the process of understanding, accepting, and transforming the communicative teaching concept in the English education field, there have been some doubts. Firstly, there is a misunderstanding of true communicative language teaching, with various incorrect reasons being used to criticize or reject the communicative approach. Secondly, some people believe that implementing CLT is quite difficult, with some scholars suggesting that CLT has a strong demand for social language background and requires a higher level of quality from teaching professionals. Therefore, they think this method is not suitable for the current Chinese environment. China adopts large-scale teaching in language education, which makes it challenging to ensure a high level of quality consistency in terms of teachers' own qualifications and teaching materials. Especially under the constraints of exam-oriented selection systems, the practice of communicative language teaching faces many restrictions in achieving teaching goals.

Overall, addressing these challenges can help enhance the promotion and implementation of CLT in language education. By exploring innovative strategies, adapting CLT principles to diverse contexts, improving assessment practices, supporting teacher training, and evaluating long-term outcomes, the field of CLT can continue to evolve and contribute to the advancement of communicative language teaching practices.

6.2. Future Research Directions and Trends in CLT

In the future, research in the field of CLT may explore emerging trends and address ongoing challenges in language education. Studies could focus on utilizing online platforms, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and other digital tools to enhance communicative abilities; exploring effective strategies to promote cross-cultural understanding; task-based language teaching, researching innovative task design and implementation strategies; exploring new methods to assess communicative abilities; adjusting teaching strategies based on different cultural and educational backgrounds; and enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in implementing CLT.

In general, future research in CLT will pay more attention to the integration of technology and education, developing cross-cultural abilities, innovative task design and implementation, diversified assessment methods, contextualized teaching strategies, and professional development of teachers to promote continuous progress and innovation in language education.

7. Conclusion

Communicative Language Teaching as an effective language teaching method has been widely recognized and applied globally, playing a significant role in enhancing the quality and efficiency of language teaching. Emphasizing practical language use has driven innovation in language instruction. With the rapid development of information technology, the integration of CLT with emerging teaching technologies has provided a diverse and interactive platform for language learning. In China, CLT has undergone a process from introduction to innovation, gradually adapting to the learning characteristics of Chinese students and enriching the domestic English teaching theory and practice.

In the future, CLT will continue to explore deep integration with technology to enhance the personalization and precision of teaching. Additionally, CLT will place greater emphasis on cultivating learners' cross-cultural communication competences and meeting the demand for diverse cultural exchanges. And Task-based language teaching, an integral part of CLT, will

innovate task design continuously to promote comprehensive improvement in learners' language abilities. The assessment system of CLT will also further develop to accurately measure learners' communicative competence. Localization practices will deepen to adapt to different educational environments and learner needs and develop CLT models suitable for local cultures. What's more, strengthening teachers' professional development and enhancing their understanding and application of CLT concepts will also be an important direction in future CLT research and practice to explore the optimization and innovation of CLT, adapting to evolving educational needs and technological developments.

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