

Challenges and Countermeasures for Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching in China

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has attracted a lot of attention in the field of language education, because of its focus on fostering meaningful language use and effective communication. However, in our country, the communicative approach is not as effective as it should be. This article begins with a brief introduction to CLT and its evolution, highlighting its key concepts and benefits. It then discusses the challenges presented by the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as well as cultural and educational differences, and the exam-oriented education system. The paper proposes strategic countermeasures to address these challenges, aiming to enhance the implementation of CLT in China's educational system.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching; English Teaching; Teaching Approach.

1. Brief Introduction to CLT

During the 1960s, a new approach to language teaching called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in response to learners' needs and advancements in teaching theory as notable linguists like Chomsky (1957) questioned the language theories behind the audiolingual method and the situational language teaching method due to their inability to explain the key property of language, namely the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. Then, the concept and theory of CLT have undergone rapid development and have gradually become more refined since Halliday and other applied linguists further improved it. CLT not only includes "communicative competence" proposed by Hymes (1972) but also fully integrates the concept of "functions of language" proposed by Halliday (1995). Since CLT was introduced in China in the late 1970s, its ideas and concepts have been widely applied in English teaching in China. According to Wang (2000:21), in CLT classroom language is taught through meaningful interactions and tasks that encourage learners to engage in authentic communication. In short, CLT is an approach that focuses on developing learners' ability to use language for real-world communication.

2. Fundamental Concepts in CLT

The core idea of the CLT is to use language as a tool for communicating with others and obtaining information, which implies its goal to develop communicative competence. Thus, in order to have a thorough understanding of the CLT, it is essential to define what "communicative competence" entails.

Hymes, as the proposer of communicative competence, considered communicative competence to be "what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in terms of three components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. In 2000, Hedge expressed a similar view on the composition of communicative competence as Canale and Swain. Hedge (2000) discussed five

main components of communicative competence. Namely, linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency. To sum up, communicative competence refers to both the explicit and implicit knowledge of a language and the ability to use it effectively and appropriately in different context.

3. Advantages of CLT

CLT has been shown to offer numerous benefits for language teaching. Distinct from audiolingual method and grammar-translation method, CLT emphasis on real-life communication, student-centred language teaching practice and engages students in a variety of communicative activities, which aims to enhance students' communicative competence and facilitate comprehensive use of target language.

3.1. Enhancing Real-life Communication Skills

Richards and Rodgers (1986) emphasized that the CLT has prioritize real-life communication as a key means of fostering language competence in authentic contexts. As for real-life communication, Wang (2000) mentioned that, in real life, language is utilized to carry out certain factions, such as, asking questions, making invitations and so on. Focusing on communication skills, CLT ensures that students learn language that is functional and practical in real-world contexts (He, 2016). Moreover, the use of authentic materials and tasks in CLT teaching activities encourages students to engage in meaningful communication. These materials and tasks reflect real-life situation, allowing students to practice and refine their communication skills when they are involved in negotiations with other students. Overall, CLT improves students' practical communication skills through authentic materials and interactive, real-world contexts for problem-solving in the target language.

3.2. Facilitating Learner-Centered Learning

CLT plays a significant role in transforming the roles of both teachers and students in the language teaching classroom, where students are positioned at the core of the learning process. Traditionally, teachers have often been seen as the primary source of knowledge and the leaders of teaching. However, under CLT, teachers transition into facilitators of learning. They guide students through interactive activities, encouraging exploration and discovery rather than simply delivering information. Moreover, CLT encourages students to take charge of their learning, learn to work collaboratively and exchanging ideas with each other in communicative tasks (Benson, 2011). For example, during a CLT class, students are engaged in group discussions where they must actively use the language to communicate with peers to complete the communicative tasks, instead of blindly receive the information provided by teachers. This promotes the transformation of students from passive receivers to active participants, which can further facilitate learner-centeredness.

3.3. Promoting Engagement in Communicative Activities

The foundational assumption of CLT is that learners acquire language through engaging in a range of communicative activities (Wang, 2000:22). According to He (2016), in CLT classrooms, activities reflecting real-life language use help students see the practical value of learning English, making the lessons more engaging. Littlewood (2000) identified two primary types of communicative activities: functional communicative activities and social interaction activities. Activities like story-sequence reconstruction and role-playing engage students, enabling meaningful language use, proving more motivating than passive learning. Furthermore, as mentioned by Brown (2001:425), "fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use". This view is echoed by Liu and Zhang (2003), who argued that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) prioritizes fluency

over accuracy initially, making learning less daunting and more enjoyable by reducing students' fear of making mistakes. Overall, CLT aims to engage students in communicative activities to boost their interest, motivation, and language skills.

4. Challenges in Implementing CLT in China

Recognizing the limitations of the traditional grammar-translation and audiolingual methods in fostering learners' communicative competence, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China began incorporating the CLT into English education in the early 1980s (Z.Rao, 2002). Nevertheless, the outcome of teaching English exclusively using CLT did not provide the expected results (Z.Rao, 2002; Su, 2007; He, 2016; Hu,X & Hu,H, 2019). The primary debates surrounding the implementation of CLT in our country are as follows.

4.1. Misaligned with the EFL Context in China

CLT has been criticized for not being fully aligned with the EFL situation in our country. On the one hand, many classrooms in China accommodate a large number of students, which can pose challenges for implementing CLT. Just as Wang (2000:35) said, CLT was developed in Europe and conducted mostly in small classes, thus whether it is practical in Chinese large-size class becomes a question. CLT thrives on student interaction and personalized feedback, both of which are difficult to achieve in an environment with limited teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction.

On the other hand, there is a significant lack of exposure to authentic language use in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China. Subsequent researchers provided additional insights and clarifications to wang's findings. Le (2021) pointed out that CLT was originally developed for English as a Second Language (ESL) countries where English is the official language of the nation, while EFL learning often takes place in settings where the language plays less major role in the community and is primarily learned only in the classroom. Thus EFL situation can be a constraint for using communicative activities due to the different purpose of learning English, learning environments, and lack of authentic English materials.

4.2. Hindered by Differences in Culture and Educational Concepts

Cultural factors play a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of CLT implementation in our country. CLT stipulates that instructional methods should prioritize learner-centered approach, which involves nurturing learners' autonomy and facilitating active communication between teacher and learners, as well as among the learners themselves. While, In the traditional Chinese educational setting, it is common for students to take on a passive role in the classroom, showing reluctance to spontaneously express their thoughts or challenge existing ideas (He, 2016). This phenomenon stems from a deeply ingrained cultural respect for authority and a pedagogical focus on rote learning, where students primarily function as recipients of knowledge, rather than active participants in the learning process. Moreover, Zhen (2002) found that in CLT classrooms, some students have become accustomed to the traditional language teaching style, which is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered approach and an emphasis on rote memory. Thus, due to cultural and educational differences, there are bound to be certain difficulties in the application of CLT in our country.

4.3. Constrained by Examination-oriented Education

The application of CLT is significantly influenced by the examination-oriented education system. Zhen (2002) reported that some students in universities and secondary schools lack motivation for communicative competence because most the language tests are grammar-based and they complained that if they get too involved in the communicative activities, they may not have sufficient time to study grammar and vocabulary for the test. Hu,Q (2010) seems to be

consistent with zhen's findings which showed that the examination-oriented education, which emphasis on test-taking abilities, tends to prioritize the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and grammatical rules, rather than the development of communicative skills. What's more, the assessment of students' communicative abilities is seldom included in exams, which definitely obstructs the implementation of CLT. In summary, an exam-oriented education system that prioritizes students' test-taking skills rather than their communicative abilities is bound to hinder the effectiveness of CLT in our country.

5. Strategies for Better Implementation

The conflict between the demands of communicative activities and the limitations of the EFL situation in China must be resolved. To address the challenges of implementing the CLT in our country, we can consider the following potential solutions.

5.1. Organize Collaborative Activities and Create Authentic Contexts

For the problem of too many learners in a lesson, group discussion mentioned above is an ideal solution, but what should be paid attention to is how to preform group activities. In group division section, in order to make sure that all students can effectively join in the task, group members should come from different levels, since students have different background knowledge leads to information gap between them and promotes active communication.

For the problem that students in EFL situations have limited opportunities to use the language in real-life situations, it is crucial for the teacher to provide them with such opportunities. For example, teacher can create create authentic language learning activities that simulate real-world communication, such as role-playing scenarios in a restaurant or shopping mall. These activities enable students to practice speaking, listening, and language skills in a natural and relevant context. Additionally, teachers can incorporate cultural elements into their lessons to further enhance the authenticity of the learning experience and help students understand how the language is used in different cultural contexts (Zhou, 2009). By providing these opportunities, teachers can effectively bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world, enabling students to develop their language skills in a meaningful and practical way.

5.2. Update Educational Concepts and Transform the Role of Learners

To achieve effective CLT, it is crucial to move beyond traditional teaching concepts that rely heavily on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction. Instead, teacher must cultivate an environment where learners are at the center of the learning process. As Lian (2008) advocated that in a CLT classroom, a teacher should act more as a facilitator than a traditional lecturer, guiding students towards discovery and encouraging them to think critically and creatively.

This shift in teaching methodology requires learners to transform their roles as well. They must move from being passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in their own learning journey. This transformation involves encouraging students to take ownership of their learning, encouraging them to ask questions, seek out information, and collaborate with peers and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, Chu and Qiao (2019) highlighted that language teachers in China should change their teaching approaches from kindergarten. By implementing CLT methods from the earliest stages of education, students can gradually become accustomed to this teaching approach and recognize their pivotal role in the learning process. CLT will foster their language skills and communication abilities, preparing them for success in their academic and professional careers.

5.3. Reform Test-focused Education and Strive for Quality-oriented Education

In order to overcome the challenges posed by test-focused education, fostering quality-oriented education is imperative. Zhen's (2002) research reveals that some Chinese students reject CLT because they think it does not teach enough grammar needed to pass grammar-based exams. This misconception needs to be addressed.

Firstly, teachers have to dispel students' misunderstandings of CLT. Numerous studies by researchers such as Liu and Zhang (2003), Zhou (2009), and Wang (2007) have convincingly argued that CLT indeed prioritizes the development of communicative competence through interactive communication, while still addressing linguistic aspects such as vocabulary and grammar. Linguistic competence is the cornerstone of communicative competence; without it, there is no communicative competence to speak of.

Secondly, quality education should be a national priority. Examination-oriented education, which relies heavily on standardized testing and test scores to measure academic performance, falls short in fostering holistic development. In contrast, quality education emphasizes holistic development and empowers students for lifelong learning (Zhou, 2002). To facilitate the transition from examination-oriented education to quality-driven education, Wang (1999) suggested three key strategies: balancing teacher guidance with learner-centered learning, harmonizing knowledge acquisition with ability enhancement, and integrating comprehensive development and individual development. By implementing these principles, we can move towards a more balanced and enriching educational system that nurtures students' full potential.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of CLT in China's educational system faces numerous challenges stemming from the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, cultural and educational differences, and the exam-oriented education system. However, the inherent benefits of CLT, such as fostering meaningful language use and effective communication, remain compelling reasons to pursue its integration into English teaching practices. To improve CLT effectiveness in China, it's crucial to train teachers in CLT techniques focusing on practical communication, update educational policies and curricula to emphasize communication skills, and reform the exam-oriented system to align with CLT goals.

It is crucial to recognize that the effectiveness of a teaching approach depends on whether it is suitable for the specific learning environment. Therefore, when new methods or approaches emerge, it is not advisable to completely abandon established practices in favor of the latest trends. A more prudent way is to tailor teaching methods or approaches to suit the diverse teaching contexts. This entails combining the benefits of different methodologies to align with educational goals and meet the needs of the learners.

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