

Application of Communicative Language Teaching Approach in China

-Taking Senior High Schools' English Teaching as an Example

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Abstract—Deriving from Hymes' theory of Communicative Competence, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method has profound impact on the language teaching both at home and abroad. Yet it has not achieved the intended results in China for various reasons. This paper is dedicated to introducing the status quo of CLT application in China's senior high schools, the reasons behind the phenomena, the features and principles of CLT and their correlations with the New Curriculum Standards of China and what we can do to ensure a better application of CLT in the Chinese environment.

Keywords—CLT; Communicative Competence; problems; suggestions

I. INTRODUCTION

The Communicative Language Teaching approach is generally believed to have appeared in the early 1970s. Replacing the Situational Language Teaching approach, it became prevalent in the west in the 1970s [1]. It is based on Hymes' theory of Communicative Competence [2]. CLT has a wide range of connotations, involving all the activities concerning teaching, including the contents of teaching syllabus, compiling of textbooks, designs of detailed teaching methods and classroom activities as well as corresponding test designs and assessment system. Littlewood [3] points out that in CLT, there are mainly two types of activities: functional communicative activities (requiring participants to focus on objectives) and social communicative activities (involving dialogues, discussions and debates). The core of CLT is to cultivate students' self-awareness, stimulate students' inner learning motivation, create the best learning situation, guide students to think independently and help those master self-exploring learning methods. In a nutshell, CLT is to help students learn independently. In the teaching process, "Teaching through Dialogues", "Salon Teaching", "Experience Teaching" and so on are all practice of CLT.

In contrast to Chomsky's opinion that linguistic ability is just the knowledge of linguistic system or grammar rules [4], Hymes believes linguistic ability is also related to properness of language usage in real situations. Thus, this ability is determined by social experience, social necessity and social motivation. We should focus on communication ability and the social life when acquiring a language, no matter whether it is

our native language or a foreign one. Hymes' greatest contribution to language teaching is that he emphasizes the social and cultural characteristics of language, namely, the interference or impact of multiple factors on language use. Thus in our teaching process, we should not only teach or learn the language knowledge, but also instill or know more about the socio-cultural backgrounds, trying to rid ourselves of the negative transfer of mother tongue.

II. THE INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF CLT IN CHINA

The CLT approach was first introduced to China in the late 1970s. Hu Wenzhong, Sun Li and Xin Bin are among the first ones. Since then, the communicative approach began to have great effects on China's foreign language teaching. In the publication library of Chinese academic literature network of CNKI, if we use "CLT" as the key words to search articles concerning the application of CLT in English teaching, we will get 880 since 1980. We can see CLT approach has an extensive and lasting impact on China. Despite its popularity, this approach hasn't achieved the intended results. According to the investigations in some senior high schools' English classrooms, CLT has not been widely used there. The reasons lie in many aspects. The main reason is that we don't have a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the communicative approach, including its goals, the barriers and constraints of implementing CLT and suitable ways that should be adopted to change the current situation.

III. THE FEATURES AND PRINCIPLES OF CLT AND THEIR CORRELATIONS WITH THE NEW CURRICULUM STANDARDS OF CHINA

Xu Qiang [5] puts forward three principles of communicative approach: 1) All the activities should center on communication; 2) Try to reproduce the communication process; 3) Do not always correct the errors. And Brown's descriptions are more detailed and convincing, who says English teaching should have the following four characteristics: 1) The center of classroom activities should be all communicative, and should not be confined to grammar or language ability; 2) The designs of language learning methods should aim to help students master the actual use of language in a meaningful way in practical, real situations; 3) Treat

fluency and accuracy as two complementary principles of communication strategy; 4) In communicative classrooms, the ultimate goal of learning must be the comprehended use of language in unrehearsed scenes, and language should be productive [6].

The above-mentioned features or so-called principles all highlight the use of English for actual communication and not for grammar or language abilities only. English is a communication tool. The purpose of English teaching is to cultivate and develop students' ability to use this tool. In 2012, the "Full-time Ordinary Senior High School English Curriculum Standards" (later we shorten it as the New Curriculum Standards) clearly define the objectives for senior high school English education: "While further developing students' comprehensive language ability, focus on their abilities to use English for information retrieving and information processing and the abilities to analyze and resolve problems. Pay special attention to the abilities to think and express in English."

We can see it is closely related to the principle of CLT, such as the description "comprehensive language ability," which is not confined to grammar only, and "abilities to use English for information retrieving and information processing and the abilities to analyze and resolve problems" coincide with the above-mentioned "the designs of language learning methods should aim to help students learn the actual use of language in a meaningful way in practical, real situations".

There are different levels for the objectives of the New Curriculum Standards, in which the sixth to the ninth level require cultivating students' communicative competence, with the ninth level being the highest, requiring training students' communicative skills and the ability to use various opportunities in English for real communication. In addition, concerning the six kinds of teaching activities of New Curricular textbooks, surveys, interviews, cooperative learning activities, improvisation and discussions are all related to dialogues, discussions and debates (3D), all of which involve verbal communication of English. Thus it can be seen how important it is to improve students' English communicative competence. So, how should we, as teachers and students, appropriately conduct CLT in the classroom setting to meet the requirements of the New Curriculum Standards?

A. *Speaking English as much as possible in English classrooms*

The prerequisite for efficient communication is students' listening and speaking abilities. Since senior high school students have already mastered a certain number of basic vocabulary, teachers may explain new language points and words with the learned vocabulary and sentence pattern, trying to interpret in a simple and understandable way and proceed step by step. Students' listening and speaking abilities are sure to improve and the abilities to think and understand in English are also cultivated in this long and repeated process. Teachers should be models for students to speak English first and then they can require students to answer questions, air out their views and make presentations in English. All things are difficult before they are easy. But this process must be

maintained. After a long time of listening and speaking practice, students can naturally understand and express themselves, and thus have the courage to carry out such activities as surveys, interviews, cooperative learning activities, improvisation and discussions (teaching activities of New Curricular textbooks), which lay a firm foundation for later communicative teaching plans.

B. *Correct handling of language errors in communication*

From the previous part about the principles of CLT, we can see those in favor of CLT do not always correct errors, but in real situations, the case is that some teachers adopt the attitude of correcting every possible error whenever it arises, for fear it may affect communication while some other teachers take the opposite stance. They all go to extremes, and either method should be abandoned. There being so many activities involving verbal communication in the textbooks of New Curriculum Standards, if we correct errors whenever they appear, in so doing students will lose self-confidence and gradually lose the courage to communicate in English. On the contrary, if we never correct students' errors, no matter it is major or minor, the result is that the false expression will be deep-rooted, cause misunderstandings in communication and may even seriously hinder efficient communication. So how should we deal with language errors in communication? In accordance with the principle of communicative approach---Do not strictly correcting every possible language error, we should encourage students to express in English. So long as the errors are not serious enough to affect the understanding of communication, they should be ignored. Other errors should be dealt with, and in terms of some difficult points, we can use Chinese instead of English to make sure the students clearly understand them.

C. *Creating classroom communication scenes*

Scenes play a very important role in communication, which refer to the social contexts of communicative activities. Teaching activities are mainly in the classroom, so the training of students' communicative abilities is mainly for the teachers to create life-like communication scenes and for students to practice themselves and achieve communication. If we have a scene lead-in, students will become stimulated to complete the task. There are many ways to create a situation, such as the use of teaching wall charts, body language, and multimedia and so on. Particularly worth mentioning is the use of multimedia in English teaching, which can fully mobilize the enthusiasm of students to learn and participate. For example, in the "Unit 3" teaching of the fifth unit "Future Life" ("New Curriculum Standard" textbook), the scene of future life will be presented to students through multimedia, which greatly stimulates students' interest in learning and relaxed atmosphere. Then, the students play the roles of citizens living in 3008, and the teacher acts as the journalist interviewing them. They may talk about the good changes as well as bad ones about the life in 3008 in such aspects as transport and houses as shown in the textbook or in the video. After that, we may give students several minutes to prepare and ask them to imitate the teacher as the interviewer. This process fully embodies the requirement of New Curriculum Standards "to train students' communicative skills and the ability to use various opportunities in English for real communication".

IV. HOW LEARNERS LEARN IN CHINESE CLASSROOMS AND THE REASONS BEHIND THESE PHENOMENA

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes the improvement of language skills and communicative competence in the process. However, language is learned by teaching rather than by application in China. Students do not have many opportunities to use what they have learned, either due to the great size of class or the ever-mounting pressure of enrollment rate. Communicative Language Teaching classrooms involve group discussions, ideas sharing, problems solving speech, and other activities; Chinese classrooms include teachers teaching and students passively listening, fiercely taking notes and mechanically remembering fragments of information. The long-practiced traditional teaching method or our cultural differences may account for this phenomenon. Still in Communicative Language Teaching classrooms teaching is in the target language, and we make full use of modern teaching equipments to accelerate the acquisition of language skills, and to cultivate students' communicative competence; whereas in Chinese classrooms, either due to certain teachers' foreign language incompetence or students' understanding abilities, many lectures or classroom activities are not conducted in the target language. Still, the teaching equipments are also outdated in many places of China, especially some remote rural areas and thus cannot provide a good atmosphere for language acquisition. Such conditions are not conducive to the implementation of CLT. Although the situations are improving, we still have a long way to go before we achieve the great goals.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING CLT IN THE CHINESE ENVIRONMENT

In the previous parts, we have given some concrete suggestions to better apply CLT to serve the New Curriculum Standards concerning the classroom setting, the following are more useful suggestions on the macro and micro-level alike.

A. *Integrating diverse methods to adapt to the Chinese reality*

Traditional teaching methods emphasize the structure of language, but ignore the language meaning (especially pragmatic meaning); emphasize the learning of language knowledge, ignore students' ability training. By simply applying the traditional language teaching method we can't fulfill the English teaching tasks well, and achieve the goals set by the "English Curriculum Standards". By simply using CLT and abandoning the traditional methods we are also behaving too radically, because this practice is incompatible with China's actual teaching situation. Therefore, it is advisable to combine the traditional language teaching method and CLT and make them complement each other in the implementing process.

B. *Teacher training*

Although CLT emphasizes learner-centeredness, teachers also play an important role in the classroom. The role of a teacher in actual teaching, according to CLT, is to provide, organize various activities, guide and coordinate the process. Because English teaching is different from other subjects, its main purpose is not to impart professional knowledge, but to

cultivate students' ability to apply English. Only through a lot of English practice both inside and outside the classroom can we train students' competence of communication. English teachers' teaching ability is an important factor, which can stimulate students' interest of English learning, activity participation and develop their independent learning ability effectively. In this sense, English teachers should not only have solid basic skills of the target language, but also the capacity to mobilize students' learning interest and cultivate their independent learning habits and abilities. In a word, they need to know more about the education psychology and CLT operating process. To achieve all these goals, teacher training programs are an indispensable part of the education reform process.

C. *Test and institution reform*

In China, the most important test is College Entrance Exam, which is held annually and taken by students at the end of 12 years' formal education. Most years' English tests of CEE in most provinces are only written tests, checking students' reading, listening (sometimes not included in some provinces) and writing skills, omitting speaking and other skills. In doing this, it emphasizes students' understanding of grammar and vocabulary, and ignores the important communicative competence. Even if the schools have qualified teachers and updated equipments to implement CLT, they may very likely give up the practice when confronted by the pressure of enrolment rate. Unfortunately when the CLT practice and the quality of the bright future of education can only be an empty promise,

D. *Changing students' role in the classroom*

In China, many students are accustomed to traditional teachers and traditional teaching methods. They have become accustomed to sitting in a classroom passively and taking notes fiercely. If the teacher adopts the communicative approach of teaching, some students will feel uncomfortable and even at loss, because they will have to think independently and participate in classroom discussions. Those whose listening and speaking abilities are comparatively low will find it hard and embarrassing to open their mouths and speak out. They may fall behind in the group discussion or couldn't catch up with the teacher or students when they are speaking so fluently and quickly. But as the saying goes, everything is hard at the beginning, only when you take the first step can you expect to be successful in the end. We should force ourselves to listen and try to understand and not be afraid to speak out. Enjoy losing face and making mistakes, because that's how acquiring a foreign language occurs.

E. *Making good use of CLT classroom activities, modern teaching equipments and cellphone applications*

A communicative language classroom in small groups is conducive to discussing and exchanging ideas, solving problems, debating and other ways to complete the task. Modern teaching equipments also play a major role in foreign language teaching process, for they can provide an authentic environment for language learners (eg. by presenting the original movies or video-clips) or make the learning process

more interesting or more impressive, such as the use of PPT and data projector. The ever-increasing number of android or ios based applications are providing plenty of opportunities for us to practice English after class. Some enable us to exchange in groups or one versus one, some enable us to record our own versions of English pronunciations to be uploaded and shared with others, and some can even make it possible for us to dub the lines in a movie or documentary. Whatever functions we dream of, they may have already appeared, waiting for us to unfold or are about to appear in the near future. Magic world, isn't it?

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has given a general description of the status quo of CLT application in China's senior high schools and offered some useful suggestions for its later application, and also discussed the various barriers and underlying reasons for the inadequate application of CLT in China, which doesn't mean CLT doesn't suit the Chinese environment. Instead, CLT has

shown the direction for our English education reform, and we should combine it with our traditional teaching methods and popularize its application to produce better students with solid knowledge and strong communicative abilities.

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