

The Adaptability of CLT in China and Teaching Suggestions

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Abstract: As China continues to prioritize English language education, it becomes crucial to assess the applicability and effectiveness of CLT in Chinese classrooms. This paper firstly gives a short review of CLT and discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with its implementation in China. Furthermore, practical teaching suggestions are provided to enhance the adaptability of CLT in the Chinese educational context.

Keywords: Communicative approach, Adaptability of CLT, Teaching suggestions.

1. Introduction and Review of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach to language teaching that focuses on developing students' communicative competence in the target language. It originated in the late 1960s when the American linguist Chomsky(1965) introduced the concept of "language competence". This concept focused on enabling learners to construct grammatically correct sentences, leading to a surge in grammar-focused language teaching. However, in the 1970s, social linguist Hymes(1972) challenged Chomsky's theory, he argued that language is a social and cultural phenomenon, and its study should extend beyond the sentence structure to explore language in real social contexts. Hymes' theory of communicative competence challenged the structuralist view of language and laid the theoretical foundation for the communicative approach.

Additionally, representative figures of constructivism theory such as Richards, Rodgers, and Vygotsky made significant contributions to the language view of communication. Their theories, including social interaction theory, scaffolding theory, and Halliday's functional account of language use, played a direct role in enriching and refining the communicative approach.

CLT emphasizes meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and the ability to effectively convey and interpret messages in real-life situations. It shifts the focus from rote memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary to the development of communicative skills. By providing opportunities for interactive and engaging activities, CLT motivates students to actively participate in the learning process and encourages students to think critically and creatively when communicating, leading to a deeper understanding of the language and its cultural context..

While it offers numerous benefits in terms of communication skills, motivation, and cultural awareness, challenges such as assessment methods, teacher training, and cultural adaptation need to be addressed for successful implementation.

Adapting CLT to different cultural and educational contexts may pose challenges due to variations in teaching approaches, expectations, and cultural norms. Next, I will assess the necessity of implementing CLT in China and think about the challenges that arise during the implementation process.

2. CLT in China

2.1. The Need for CLT in China

Chinese traditional approach places heavy emphasis on explicit grammar instruction, vocabulary memorization, and written exercises, with limited opportunities for authentic communication and interaction in English. As a result, students may develop strong knowledge of grammar rules and vocabulary but struggle to apply them in real-life communicative situations. Therefore, the communication approach focused on fostering effective communication skills has garnered significant attention and extensive research among educators in China.

For over three decades, the fundamental principles and concepts of CLT have deeply permeated English classroom instruction in China, leaving a lasting impact. The English curriculum standard for compulsory education (2011 edition) emphasizes a shift from the traditional approach of focusing solely on vocabulary and grammar instruction to cultivating students' practical language application skills. The introduction of "activity teaching", "situational teaching" and a "learner-centered" approach in the new general senior high school English curriculum standard (2017 edition) aligns perfectly with the principles of communicative teaching. Hu Xiaoyi(2019) pointed out that the adoption of CLT is not only essential for fostering language application skills but also vital for nurturing students' core competence in line with the requirements of the new curriculum reform.

2.2. The Adaptability of CLT in China

Wu Heping(1999) argued that CLT, developed in the early 1970s in western countries, has been widely implemented in teaching practices across numerous countries. In contrast to the initial approach of blindly adopting and utilizing it, the current study and application of CLT in China have become more methodical and discerning. Many experts and scholars have raised legitimate concerns regarding the suitability of the communicative approach in the Chinese context, offering diverse perspectives on the matter(Zhang Yina, 2006).

2.2.1. Non-native Language Learning Factors

CLT, originating from the social context of Western Europe, may not fully align with the educational background of our country, posing challenges to its seamless integration. According to Stern(1983), the language teaching environment

holds a pivotal role in language instruction, encompassing the broader social, cultural, and political milieu. Adapting CLT to the Chinese cultural context requires sensitivity to these factors, cultural differences in communication styles, such as indirectness or reliance on nonverbal cues, should be considered when promoting authentic and direct communication in CLT.

2.2.2. Grammar Factors

According to Widdowson(1991), the communicative approach emphasizes the active engagement of learners in using language, enabling them to express ideas and engage in various forms of communicative interactions. The approach recognizes that knowledge emerges from practical application and usage. However, for Chinese learners who are not exposed to an English-speaking environment and are native Chinese speakers, their language usage relies heavily on cognitive processes(Gui Shichun, 2010), it is crucial for these learners to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the rules governing the English language and culture. By doing so, they can effectively employ correct and appropriate language and speech behaviors.

2.2.3. Initial Learners Factors

According to Sun Ming(2007), the effective utilization of language is heavily reliant on the development of a corresponding cultural proficiency. Sun emphasized that it is unrealistic to expect the cultivation of communicative competence during the initial stages of learning. Chinese students often exhibit a tendency to adapt to a teacher-centered learning environment. Consequently, in early communication classes, students may experience feelings of helplessness and struggle to adjust due to the authoritative nature of teachers, their own personal traits, or inadequate language proficiency.

2.2.4. Teacher's Misconceptions of CLT and Incompetency

Many teachers have a limited understanding of CLT, often perceiving it solely as a set of specific teaching techniques and tools, while overlooking its profound ideological underpinnings(Zhang Yina, 2006). Some view it as the ultimate teaching approach, while others mistakenly equate communication ability solely with oral proficiency. Additionally, it requires teachers who were native speakers or who has native-like fluency in the foreign language, but not all teachers are proficient enough in the foreign language and culture.

2.2.5. Resource factors

Adequate infrastructure and resource support are essential for the successful implementation of CLT in China. However, a significant challenge arises when attempting to apply the principles of CLT in the context of large class sizes in primary, secondary, and even university settings in China (Wu Heping, 1999). Shu Dingfang (2005) highlighted the substantial disparity between existing teaching resources and the immense demand from both learners and teachers, with many materials primarily focused on test preparation. The issue of imbalanced educational resources further exacerbates this situation. According to Yu Fang and Ning Shuang (2010), numerous rural schools struggle to sustain regular teaching expenses and lack the necessary equipment for effective instruction, including the use of multimedia tools.

2.2.6. Assessment and Evaluation Factors

The application of the communicative approach is hindered by the prevailing examination-oriented educational

environment. As highlighted by Shu Dingfang (2005), a significant number of teachers prioritize cultivating students' test-taking skills over developing their communicative abilities. In the final years of junior and senior high school, class time is predominantly devoted to test practice and lectures, teachers continue to emphasize grammar knowledge and examination-specific content within the limited class time.

Furthermore, evaluating communication abilities poses a considerable challenge. How should it be assessed? What criteria should be used? Should it be evaluated through automated systems or by teachers? Should communication skills be included in entrance examinations? In a country like China, with a large student population and limited resources, these are complex issues that require careful consideration.

By addressing these issues, China can enhance the adaptability of CLT within its educational system, facilitating its effective implementation and fostering the development of communicative competence among English language learners. Now, I will provide specific recommendations to tackle these challenges.

3. Reflections and Teaching Suggestions

3.1. Authentic Language Use

Genuine language use fosters the development of intercultural communication skills. As Liao Ling (2012) suggested that the authentic context serves various functions, including stimulating, optimizing, regulating, and promoting the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of educated individuals. Krashen further emphasizes that language acquisition occurs unconsciously through natural language usage. Given the significant disparities between Chinese and Western social cultures, learners must not only learn whom to communicate with but also understand when and why they should express themselves. To facilitate this process, teachers should provide students with real-life communication scenarios, such as libraries, supermarkets, and hospitals. By ensuring that students use authentic and natural language samples rather than artificially constructed sentences for training purposes, they can grasp the implicit meanings within discourse and enhance their cross-cultural communication skills.

3.2. The Balance between Form and Meaning

The expression of meaning should not be mistaken for disregarding grammatical accuracy. Within communicative pedagogy, the importance of grammatical correctness is on par with pragmatic adaptability, as highlighted by Hu Xiaoyi (2019). Hedge (2000) identified five key components of communicative competence, namely linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and fluency. Linguistic competence focuses on understanding the language itself, including its form and meaning. Consequently, it is essential for Chinese English learners to receive explanations of grammar rules. However, the correction of grammatical errors should be tailored to the specific communicative activities. For instance, when training students' fluency, "minor grammatical errors may be permitted" (Wang Ping, 2002). Teachers must strike a balance between form and meaning, avoiding extreme formalism or excessive leniency, as both hinder the development of communicative competence.

3.3. The Emotional and Knowledge Support

Not all students are equally suited to the communicative approach, as this suitability is influenced by their language proficiency and individual personality traits. Some students, due to their limited knowledge level, may lack the necessary background to fully engage in communication activities, while others may be introverted and struggle to express their ideas effectively. The communicative approach places a strong emphasis on trust, mutual assistance, and promotion between teachers and students, as highlighted by Breen(1980). These elements form the emotional foundation for students' subject experience. In the communicative approach, mistakes are considered a natural part of the learning process, and perfection in expression is not demanded from students. When students encounter difficulties in expressing themselves, teachers should provide guidance and support, creating a safe environment that encourages students to speak without feeling embarrassed. Within the communication classroom, it is crucial for teachers to consistently offer encouragement, support, and guidance to their students.

3.4. Teacher Training and Professional Development

Many teachers often misunderstand CLT, which stems from the limited understanding of its conceptual implications during its introduction, as noted by Wu Heping(1999). In reality, the communicative approach represents a comprehensive language teaching ideology and methodology with profound implications, as emphasized by Shu DingFang(2005). To effectively incorporate it into their classrooms, teachers should engage in continuous professional development, keeping abreast of current trends and research in CLT and other pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, teachers need to gain a deep understanding of the underlying principles of CLT, taking into account the unique national conditions and educational environment in China. Additionally, teachers should deepen their professional knowledge to meet the higher demands set by CLT. They are not only responsible for imparting language knowledge but also for cultivating students' communicative skills. This involves understanding communicative strategies, cultural knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge. Teachers must enrich their own knowledge to effectively guide students in the process of communication and nurture their intercultural communication abilities.

3.5. The Utilize of Resources

Simple textbook materials are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the communicative approach, as students require a wide range of resources to support their communicative activities. In response to this, the government should increase its investment in education, including providing teachers with a variety of authentic materials, such as videos, audio recordings, and real-life texts, reducing class sizes, attracting more talented individuals to join the teaching profession, expanding training opportunities, and enhancing the overall quality of teachers. Simultaneously, teachers should take full advantage of their own agency and tap into students' interests, utilizing various available resources creatively to meet their communicative needs. As Widdowson(1998) suggests, communication teaching must take into account students' interests, needs, and behaviors. Only when students are genuinely interested in the

communicative activities will they actively participate. Modern multimedia technology offers a wealth of teaching conveniences, with teachers able to utilize interactive language learning software, online resources, language learning apps, and multimedia platforms to provide additional language practice, authentic materials, and opportunities for self-study. In areas where equipment may be lacking, teachers' lively and engaging performances can also serve as valuable learning resources. Classroom settings can also be conducive to interactive and communicative activities, with appropriate seating arrangements.

3.6. Ongoing Feedback and Assessment

The assessment of communicative competence primarily relies on formative evaluation, supplemented by summative evaluation. While traditional paper-and-pencil tests remain important, it is crucial to prioritize communication skills as a vital competency for individuals in the new era. Developing communicative competence is a gradual and long-term process, requiring dedicated attention. The evaluation content and criteria should be tailored to regional and learning differences. Generally, the evaluation should encompass aspects such as fluency, clarity, appropriateness, and the grading of students' oral tasks. Rather than relying solely on traditional evaluation methods, it is essential to emphasize the dynamic growth of students' communicative competence from a descriptive perspective (Xu Jia, 2022). Integrating assessment methods such as peer evaluation, group discussions, growth portfolios, reflection journals, and teacher evaluations can be beneficial. By incorporating assessment into the learning process, students can set goals and monitor their language development.

4. Conclusion

CLT holds significant importance in fostering students' communication competence. Nevertheless, practical implementation of this approach reveals certain limitations. Consequently, English educators and scholars ought to take into account the unique teaching contexts prevalent across diverse regions within our country. This encompasses meticulous consideration of aspects such as the strategic design of teaching scenarios, accessibility to instructional resources, thoughtful selection of teaching activities, as well as conscientious reflection and evaluation of the teaching process. By meticulously addressing these components, it becomes possible to delve into a comprehensive communication teaching theory that is attuned to the specific characteristics of the Chinese educational landscape.

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