Communicative language teaching in the Chinese environment

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Abstract: In order to explore effective ways to develop Chinese English learners' communicative competence, this study first briefly reviews the advantages of communicative language teaching (CLT) method which widely practiced in the Western countries and analyzes in details its obstacles in Chinese classroom context. Then it offers guidelines for compromising the communicative approach with the traditional Chinese approach. Finally, it puts forward some principles and techniques for English teaching practice in the Chinese environment.

Key words: communicative competence; communicative language teaching (CLT); Chinese English teaching (CET)

1. Introduction

Communicative competence can be understood as the knowledge and ability to demonstrate appropriate communicative behaviors in the interaction context. As an outcome of the teaching movement for communicative competence, communicative approach first appeared in the 1960s and today many people believe that it is a great achievement in Western countries (HU, 1985). Influenced by Western countries, China has adopted communicative approach in late 1970s, and has deeply involved in communicative language teaching (CLT) ever since. Since 1992, the State Commission of Education has set teaching of Chinese English learners' communicative competence as the ultimate pedagogic goal in the new English Teaching Syllabus. Nevertheless, the practice of CLT in Chinese does not provide the expected results. Students on the whole still demonstrate a deficiency in effective communication. Superficially, the students' communicative deficiency is due to a lack of the knowledge of communication rules of the target language. Originally, it is caused by the improper language teaching method. Making the communicative approach as a viable approach for Chinese English teaching (CET) is of vital importance. This paper is designed to explore the possible solutions. It is hoped that the implications of the findings of the study will benefit EFL educators in terms of developing students' communicative competence.

The next section will have a brief review of CLT practice in the West so as to find the obstacles to its use in CET.

2. CLT practice in the West

Since the 1970s, after being widely implemented in the Western countries, CLT has continued to evolve and has showed typically the following characteristics:

(1) CLT practice in the West is more student-centered than teacher-centered. The primary role of the teacher in the classroom is to facilitate the student-student communication process through effective learning tasks. Students are engaged in interaction and take responsibility for examining and evaluating each other's contribution.

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(2) In CLT practice, a variety of task-based communication activities, games, role plays and simulations, usually carried out in small groups, give students an opportunity to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning.

(3) In the process of performing these activities, the students' native language is avoided. Error correction may be infrequent or absent. Grammar learning is both inductive and deductive by carrying out communicative tasks. Furthermore, most language teachers use authentic materials, such as signs, newspapers, magazines, advertisements or graphics.

3. CLT practice in the Chinese environment

Advantages of CLT are quite self-evident from the characteristics that the author has reviewed. But CLT is "so different to the traditional theory and practice from foreign language education in China, so it is not surprising that, in some quarters, it should meet with stubborn and protracted resistance" (LI, 1984, p. 12). The main obstacles are as follows:

(1) Firstly, owing to a lack of English proficiency, some Chinese teachers are not able to answer spontaneous questions about the target language, sociolinguistics or culture as they arise from interactions in the classroom. It is not rare to hear teachers complain that: "I can teach English to some extent. It is quite beyond me if I am asked to give more explanations on language and cultural differences".

(2) Secondly, CLT tends to counter traditional teaching practice as intensive reading is integrated into all stages of learning in China. There is a keen interest in an exact understanding of every word, a low tolerance for ambiguity, and a focus on discrete grammar points and specific syntactical constructions (TING, 1987). For most students, learning English means memorizing words and reciting as much of the book and language points as possible after attending lectures. The discrete-point, structurally based national examinations, such as National Matriculation English Test (NMET) and College English Test (CET 1-4) virtually do not test communication skills.

(3) The teachers' authority and students' passive role are the third obstacle to improve classroom interaction. Students have been trained to be obedient ever since kindergarten. They are not in the habit of arguing for their own point of view even if teachers accidentally make mistakes, and taking part in simulated interactions (TING, 1987).

(4) The fourth obstacle comes from populational constrain. English classrooms are quite large in China with more than one hundred students at colleges and universities. Such a crowded classroom leaves almost no room for free communicative activities. Moreover, students are of different proficiency levels and teachers can not meet the needs of the students equally in class due to the limited teaching hours.

So far, the author has examined characteristics of CLT in the West and obstacles to engaging these methods in Chinese classrooms. It is clear that communicative approach should be adopted to Chinese classroom contexts rather than be copied from the West.

4. Compromising the communicative approach and the Chinese traditional approach

English education in China is practiced in a non-English-speaking environment. All teaching methods have to be based on this condition. Here, the author promotes an idea of drawing on the communicative approach and continuing to make reference to the Chinese traditional approach. Thus Chinese CLT may have the following new characteristics:

4.1 Learner-centered with the teacher's guidance

In most traditional Chinese classrooms, the teacher is in the dominant position while the students are the passive recipients. A good method should make the students become the active participants in the learning process. However, students can never be left to do things completely by themselves. The teacher should function as a helper, giving guidance and advice when necessary. For example, the teacher can run a communicative activity of strip stories (reading and interaction) by using of authentic materials, which enables every student in large classes to participate in the communicative practice. Authentic texts must be interesting and useful, and the teacher can walk around to make suggestions about how students may proceed or to see how well they are performing.

4.2 The teaching of grammar

The communicative approach suggests that explicit grammar rules should not be provided (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). But English learners in China would not be harmed by the teacher's explanation of some grammar points. "We would like to know what happens, because if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively" (Harvey, 1985). However, Chinese teachers must be aware that the purpose of grammar explanations is, first, to teach students the grammar rules function, and then to provide them with appropriate circumstances to practice the rules so that the students can ultimately use them in real life situations.

4.3 Correctness and appropriateness

It should be admitted that the ability to produce correct sentences is a crucial one in learning a language, but it must also be recognized that this ability should not be acquired at the expense of communicative effectiveness in the light of the theory of communicative competence. Students should not only learn how to produce correct sentences as isolated linguistic units, they should also learn how to produce sentence appropriately in a specific situation to achieve a communicative purpose. Appropriateness is just as important as correctness. Neither of them should be neglected in English teaching.

4.4 Linguistic accuracy and fluency

Proponents of communicative approach insist that teaching focuses on fluency. While in Chinese traditional classroom teaching, linguistic accuracy is of primary importance. Then which one should be given priority? Here, the author promotes the idea that linguistic accuracy and fluency should be given the same emphasis. At the elementary stage, English teaching should focus on accuracy which is the foundation of fluency, while at the advanced stage the teaching focus should be shifted to fluency.

5. Methods suitable for CLT in the Chinese environment

Here the author promotes some concrete techniques that are suitable for the Chinese classroom context to achieve the goal of CLT—to develop learners' communicative competence.

5.1 Integrating communicative function into linguistic teaching

Teaching grammar rules enables students to compose correct sentences, but far from communication in the target language. And there is no single equation between linguistic forms and communicative functions. Affirmative sentences, for instances, are sometimes used as questions. One linguistic form can fulfill a variety of communicative functions, and one function can be fulfilled by a variety of linguistic forms. For example, requests are more often expressed indirectly than by imperatives.

Thus, in teaching linguistic forms, teachers should also teach the functions which linguistic forms express. At the same time, metapragmatic knowledge, such as speech act theory, conversational implicature and organization

and principles, is needed as a strong explanatory function to language.

5.2 Developing students' cultural awareness in the target language

Culture manifests itself both in patterns of language and in forms of activities and behaviors. The teacher may make full use of the classroom to accumulate students' culture knowledge bit by bit in the daily English study. Students can be presented with various facts of the English culture through reading materials, group discussions, lectures and video tapes, during which they can abstract significant cultural details. There are two popular methods aimed to develop communicative cultural awareness in English learning. One is called cultural assimilators and the other is known as culture capsule (Brislin & Pedersen, 1976).

If conditions are permitted, the teacher may organize some activities according to the Western customs at students' spare time. For example, the teacher can introduce the origin of the Ester festival to the students and let them celebrate the festival themselves. Through such exposure, students will develop a more mature understanding of the target culture.

5.3 Incorporating situational constrains into language teaching

It needs to incorporate teaching situational constrains with grammatical patterns. For instance, when a teacher teaches "How do you do?" in the first lesson, the teacher should better also teach that it is only used in face-to-face encounters, and when the teacher later have telephone conversations the teacher can easily contrast "Hello, this is John Smith." with "How do you do, I am John Smith."

Many expressions that are socially inappropriate in English are caused by register interference. The teacher also needs to teach the students to be sensitive to levels of style so that noting such levels becomes part of their language learning strategies.

5.4 Making good use of activities

Activities, if used creatively, can give students more opportunities to practice using English in "real-life situations". Small talks are good communicative activities to teach formulaic expressions which are necessity in daily life to create a sense of social communion among people. At the initial stage, students may learn to produce interactional exchanges which contain only one or two utterances at a time, such as:

> (1) A: I hate rush hour traffic.
>   B: Me too.
> (2) A: Boy, the weather is lousy today.
>   B: Yeah. I hope it will stop raining.
>
> (KANG, S. M., 1997, p. 11)

As the learners get familiar with these small talks, they may develop larger talks which involve a topic in activities, such as class report. Initially learners may depend on predicable topics, able to answer questions about recurring topics, such as: "What school courses they are taking?", their reactions to their school lives, their future occupation and so on.

Practicing activities are as following:

> (A) Situations
> A: Carol, I need some help.
> B: What's the matter?
> A: I can't decide what dress to wear to the party. What do you think?
> B:
> (B) Semi structured:
> A: Who was that girl that talked so much at the party?

B: Oh, that was Amy Demian, an old friend of mine.

A:

B: She's a sweet girl. Why, didn't you like her?

A:

(C) Unstructured:

(1) You are invited to an American home for dinner. You do not like the salad but you ate it. They offer you some more.

(2) Your good friend is wearing a horrible shirt. He/she just bought it and asks you how you like it.

(3) Your mother tells you that you do not look well. She asks you how you feel. You feel terrible but you want go to the ball game and do not want her to know.

During these activities, when the speaker is trying to express concept for which the vocabulary is lacking, the teacher may lead them to develop the skills in self-initiated repairs and requests for assistance, so as to build up students' communicative strategies.

The activities suggested above are suitable for CET and represent a continuum from less communicative to more communicative. It would be unrealistic to demand that all lessons feature are the authentic exercises. But if the teacher want to teach the students to function in the target language, it would do very well to systematically steer the teaching toward such activities that serve to teach not only language, but also the social use of language.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores, possible ways to make the communicative approach as a viable approach for CET. In order to develop students' communicative competence more effectively, Chinese English teachers should adapt communicative approach and compromise it with Chinese traditional approach in light of the Chinese environment. Language teaching is a theoretical as well as practical activity. It would not work effectively to be dogmatic. Chinese teachers should adjust their teaching methods to meet the needs of students and the exigencies of the teaching situation. The achievement of the goal of developing students' competence also demands a systematic change in a syllabus design, textbook compilation and, above all, teaching training. The internal factors such as students' motivation, characteristic and learning strategies also should be taken into account.

The suggestions that this paper has put forward are only tentative and obviously need to be tested further in teaching practice before their validity can be assessed. It is hoped that the implications of the findings of the study will benefit EFL educators in terms of developing students' communicative competence, thus sparking more interest in research on this aspect.

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