Communicative Language Teaching in China:
Misconceptions, Applications and Perceptions

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Abstract

The paper focuses on communicative language teaching, its application and different understanding of it from students' and teachers'. It shows us some resistance and difficulties in employing CLT in class. These complexities provide some insights into the barriers to the processes of college English teaching reform in China. In this way the paper explores good ways to improve students' communicative competence and their overall ability in English.

Keywords: CLT, communicative competence, autonomy, ESL

Introduction

This paper shows English language teaching in China is constituted by divergent stories and not a single narrative. Chinese students' English learning strategies are primarily composed of the following features: focus on reading and writing; grammar and translation; memorisation of vocabulary (Rao, 2002). However, this traditional grammar-translation method "failed to develop an adequate level of communicative competence (i.e. the ability to use the target language for authentic communication)" (Hu, 2002, p.93). In order to catch up with the development of economy and to

promote international exchange, students' communicative competence even their overall ability in language need to be improved. Both secondary schools and universities began to reform English teaching by introducing communicative language teaching (CLT) in the early 1980s. With CLT now in place the stress is on listening and speaking activities along with the previous focus on reading and writing.

Nevertheless, the adoption of CLT methods has not necessarily resulted in the expected outcomes for improvements in English communicative competence (Rao, 2002). Some students have responded negatively to communicative activities, while some teachers have not been confident about using CLT pedagogies. The reform of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China through the adoption of CLT has aroused considerable debate. The valuing of CLT stands in relation the importance attached to traditional Chinese teaching and learning strategies. This has led to the adjustment of CLT to the demands and conditions for language learning and teaching in China.

This paper is composed of three sections. The **first section** of it explores the meaning by setting out four of the main misconceptions about it and discusses why they have arisen, and why they can be so described. In doing this, this section attempts to define some important characteristics of communicative language teaching as it is presently practised (Thompson, 1996). The **second section** reports on a study of a communicative approach to College English reading that was implemented to address the problem of "dumb" and "deaf" ways of language learning so as to improve the communicative competence of college students. Through reference to theories of language acquisition, discourse and learner autonomy, this section explores the feasibility of using a communicative approach in reading classes. The **third section** presents a study of Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in English classes. The foreign-language learning context allows the exploration of the students' personal feelings and beliefs about this pedagogy. While communicative language teaching is hailed as an effective approach, there are a number of unresolved issues. The evidence from these debates raises questions about whether a communicative approach might supplement rather than totally replace the use of traditional pedagogies in College English classes in China. However, to begin there is a need to provide some brief background information about its uses in China.

Background of CLT in China

When communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced in China at first, it met with considerable resistance (Li, 2003; Zhu, 2003; Hu, 2002). Its pioneers changed the traditional grammar-translation method into a student-centred communicative approach. However, because of teaching conditions, teacher qualifications, and the national testing system, most of the ELT teachers who had adopted CLT method grew less confident of it. The impact of the Band 4 College English Test (CET-4), the national college entrance examination saw them loose their initial enthusiasm, and return to the prevailing grammar-translation methods.

Zhu summarised with an increasing series of CLT text books published by the end of 1990s, CLT started to be accepted and teachers were encouraged to teach communicatively and interactively in classes. Many students with at least average proficiency in English were unable to communicate effectively with native speakers. The students were dissatisfied with their communicative competence.

There is no one commonly accepted authoritative model of CLT, which originated from communicative theory. The main purpose of CLT is to develop learners' communicative competence.

Perhaps the central characteristic of CLT is that "almost everything that is done is done with communicative intent" (Larsen-Freeman cited in Rao 2002, p.87). A variety of such language learning activities are organised in different contexts and roles. These activities provide students opportunities to communicate meaningfully in this foreign language. Meanwhile, they are also expected not to use their native language during class while the teacher deliberately minimises the corrections of students' errors in order to encourage risk-taking, confidence building and language learning. Another feature of CLT is that "activities in the Communicative Approach are often carried out by students in small groups" (Larsen-Freeman cited in Rao 2002, p.87). Such group activities provide each student opportunities to interact with each other through practising meaningful and authentic language. In the process of communicative activities it is desirable that authentic materials be introduced and learners be provided with a chance to develop strategies for understanding language as do native speakers do. One more noteworthy attribute of CLT is "its learner-centred and experience-based teaching" (Richards and Rodgers cited in Rao, 2002, p. 88). In the CLT class the teachers, along with the students are managers of learning.

The main role of the teacher is not a ruler, dictator or speaker, but an organiser, helper and enlightener in class so that the students could be relaxed and confident.

Some misconceptions about CLT

According to Thompson communicative language teaching is accepted by many linguists and language teachers as an effective approach and is hailed as the dominant theoretical model in ELT, no matter what teaching situation may be. Attempts have been made to pay attention to CLT and to identify its characteristic features (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Harmer (1991) shows that teacher education and the principles of CLT are largely treated as clearly understood and accepted.

However, many teachers are not clear about CLT. In general, CLT puts stress on communication with the language. In classrooms, CLT is strongly involved in special activities, e.g. pair work, group discussion, role play and so on. However, certain misconceptions about CLT still exist. Thompson (1996) summarises the following four misconceptions that are frequently voiced.

About grammar

Some applied linguists have argued strongly that grammar teaching should be minimised. One line of argument is that grammar teaching is impossible for the knowledge used in a language by a speaker is too complex (Prabhu 1987). Another line is that grammar teaching is unnecessary as knowledge is a kind that can not be passed on with rules, but can only be acquired unconsciously through exposure to the language (Krashen 1988). The effect could be recognised by teachers through practices in teaching. CLT does never refuse grammar teaching. Some linguists and teachers always stresses grammar is necessary for communication. But at the same time others put stress on pair work. However, it is an issue about how to learn grammar. Perhaps the view is too simplistic that grammar is impossible to teach for it is too complex.

The focus is the learners discovering grammar not teachers covering grammar. Learners talk at most of time under the condition that teachers give them guidance about the language knowledge. If students have no idea of the new knowledge, they won't be able to put them in words.

Students will learn more effectively if they participate in communicative activities actively about what they are learning. Ellis (1992) forwards that while looking explicitly at grammar may not lead immediately to learning, it will facilitate learning at a later stage when the learner is ready (in some way that is not yet understood) to internalise the new information about the language.

About speaking

The focus on communicate activities leads to this misconception that CLT means teaching only speaking. For many teachers and students, the main purpose of learning a foreign language is to speak the language. So they put the stress on speaking and listening skills.

Another reason for this misconception is there is a belief that learners need enough hand proper practice in the process of learning a foreign language. And often it is interpreted into that teacher talking time (TTT) is to be reduced, and student talking time (STT) is to be maximised. Learners should communicate not only through speaking the language but through reading as well, but it takes place at least between two people. While reading the text, you seem talking with your partner through words.

There is a complaint that CLT often ignores written language. Learners talk more in CLT classes than in grammar-translation ones. But college English textbooks (e.g. College English published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2000) provide students and teachers many activities in class and outside of classes as well. Teachers can organise different activities according to students' variety of language learning needs at different stage of learning English. In class students can not only speak English, think in English and also read and write English.

About pair work

This misconception is that pair work means role play. In fact role play is only one of useful techniques for teach to employ in developing students' communicative competence and one way to practise meaningful language in an authentic context. However, pair work and group work are more flexible and useful techniques than role play. Role play especially at very simple level, such as conversation between a doctor

and a patient; a teacher and a student or a customer and shopkeeper, may not be used as much as pair work or group work.

Through pair work and group work, students can work together and help each other to solve a problem, analyse a passage, prepare a presentation, make up a story, design a questionnaire and do exercises. They can also learn knowledge and skills from each other, which will lead them to greater success by undertaking tasks.

About teachers

Medgyes (1986) argues that CLT demands too much on teachers, more so than grammar-translation approaches and lessons tend to be less predictable; teachers have to interact with students in as 'natural' a way as possible; they have to be skilful with wider range of management than in the traditional teacher-centred classroom. There are a lot unpredictable in class which is an encouragement and also a challenge for them. But teachers are not supermen and it is far more difficult to use CLT method. Students shouldn't expect too much from their teachers, they are only enlighteners, organisers and helpers.

The Application of Communicative Approach to
College English Reading Class

In order to meet the needs of development of a knowledge, economy and society, the goal of College English teaching is to develop students' overall ability of English. Before 2000, the same college English text books were used in most universities for more than 10 years designed for traditional methods. In the year of 2000, the new textbooks edited by Ying Huilan with student-centred approach provided teachers with sufficient activities to develop their communicative competence. We conducted an experiment project about college English teaching with communicative approach and a new series of textbooks in Automobile College of Jilin University. It's a part of College English teaching reform in China. The study began from the September of 2002. Eight non-English major classes were chosen at random. Four classes with the communicative approach and the other four in traditional way constitute two contrastive groups. The study lasted two semesters. The purpose of it was to find out the results of applying the communicative approach to College

English reading classes with the new books and to assess the effectiveness of the communicative approach in reading classes.

Literature review

Widdowson (1972) points out that the root of the problem, the learners' deficiency in the ability to actually use the language lies in the approach itself. According to Littlewood (1981), many aspects of language learning can take place only through natural processes, which operate when a person is involved using the language for communication and the learners' ultimate goal is to communicate with others. Therefore the research designs to adopt CLT approach to improve students' communicative competence.

Krashen (1985) conveys that second language acquisition is unconscious process of using language, not directly obtained by conscious learning. Thus the major task for a teacher is to create an environment or a setting for students to acquire English by using it through activities in class. Ellis (1997) says whether a person is a good language learner or a poor one depends largely on his / her understanding of language. To be regarded as successful English learners, students need to get the information from reading and listening, and express themselves clearly.

However, the problem is how to make full use of the limited time in class to improve students' overall language competence by communicating in class since their textbook consist chiefly of reading materials. Widdowson (1978) points out that an overemphasis on grammar would lead to prevent the learners from developing their communicative competence. In grammar-translation classes teachers' detailed explanations and exercises of grammar might be a waste of time. In these classes there is little chance for students to communicate with language.

According to Murcia and Olshtain (2000) on interactive reading process, involving top-down and bottom-up processing occur at the same time. In bottom-up processing, learners solve problems relevant to language knowledge themselves. Teachers gradually introduce knowledge about cohesive devices and reading strategies which influence their reading habits. In top-down processing, students try to get information from reading and content schemata on the basis of knowledge obtained in their daily life. The teachers' task in class is to help students understand the discourse structure of what they were reading. This is an efficient way to

understand the reading of materials and get the main ideas. In reading class students were supposed to recognise the discourse structure and the outline of the passage so as to get a better understanding of the global structure and content.

According to Snow (1996), students learn effectively about language when they take part actively in the communication with language rather than only passively accepting what the teacher said. And Brow (1991) reveals that a language learner can, and must, and take control of his/her own language learning and assume responsibility for his/her success or failure. So the research intended to find ways to promote students' learning autonomy from the very beginning, or help them to develop the ability to take charge of their own learning.

Hypotheses and Procedures of the study

This study sought to investigate whether a communicative approach could help students acquire their vocabulary while reading through communicative activities, and develop their ability of using language and arouse their interest in learning English (Li, 2003). A Pre-treatment questionnaire asked about the students' perception of the discourse structures and reading strategies at the beginning of the semester. 116 students received the questionnaire and all returned them. It was found that only 26.7% students knew about English discourse structures and 15% of them had no reading strategies at all. In terms of their readiness for a communicative approach: the students were being used to passive and obedient to teachers, waiting quietly for what teachers give them. At first they need to know about learner-centred approach, learner autonomy, the roles of themselves and teachers in class, and their responsibilities for their own learning.

Another survey conducted during the treatment process was undertaken to learn about the students' understanding of cohesive devices so as to inform teachers' further instructions. 82.1% of the students had difficulty recognizing lexical-cohesion of general nouns; and 78.6% of them could not easily make out the substitutions of synonymies.

There were three steps taken to conduct communicative activities in class:

1) Warm-up activities:
2) Reading activities
3) Follow-up activities

1) Warm-up activities

In order to make students familiar with the topic they were going to read about, group discussion, pair work and individual presentation were arranged before reading. Group discussion, pair work, changing partner and circle discussion were organized to make sure that everyone took part in the interaction. Sometimes teachers had to join in as a partner. Students' interest in English learning was aroused in such a dynamic and active atmosphere.

2) Reading activities

Teachers and students analysed the characteristics of different discourse structures together in class to make sure students understood the global structure and was aware of the main idea in the material they were reading. Predictive reading activity and jigsaw reading activity were organised to improve the students clarity of discussion about both the discursive and grammatical structure of the article and develop the ability to predict.

（a）A predictive reading activity

This activity was suitable for narrative passages which were divided into parts for one group, then another to read one part in a limited time. Then they were asked to work in small groups to predict what would happen later. Each student in the group had to offer his/her own prediction and share these with the whole of the class. After that they went on to read the following part to test their different expectations. Whoever shared the same ideas with the author would be very excited, others with different prediction were amused, too.

（b）A Jigsaw reading activity

For this exercise, the teacher divided the selected material according to structure and cohesive devices into sections and copied them for students. Then the teacher divided students into groups, and each group read only one paragraph within a limited time trying to find the main idea or topic sentence or supporting ideas, and predict what would happen in the following paragraph and maybe what had happened in the previous paragraph. They solved problems they met while reading by discussing issues with their peers. The activity followed two procedures:

A. one student from each group made a report on the main idea, the key information and the important discourse markers, the other students had to listen carefully and

take notes. After all the reports, the students knew the main content of each paragraph. They then worked in groups to decide the order of the paragraphs. In the end, the whole class agreed on the logical sequence.

B. the students were divided into different groups, with each member coming from a different group. Each student in the new group explained his paragraph and situated in relationship to the other paragraphs. The group then organised the passage according to the most logical order.

3) Follow-up activities

Teachers asked questions about the passage to get feedback from the students after these reading activities. All activities were organised to see that students participate actively in all interactions and eventually improve their overall English language ability.

Outcomes from the study

The following outcomes of this study revealed the results of using   communicative approach.

1. Achievement from the final examination

The following results from the two contrastive groups (traditional grammar-translation -- G group and communicative -- C group) were achieved after having been taught for two semesters. Test papers were exactly the same in listening and reading. The part of vocabulary and structures were all from their respective textbooks.

In table 1, C1 represents class 1 of communicative group

C2 represents class 2 of communicative group

C3 represents class 1 of communicative group

C4 represents class 1 of communicative group

R40 means full marks of reading is 40

L15 means full marks of listening is 15

V15 means full marks of vocabulary and structures is 15

T1 represents class 1 of traditional grammar-translation group

T2 represents class 1 of traditional grammar-translation group

T3 represents class 1 of traditional grammar-translation group

T4 represents class 1 of traditional grammar-translation group

Table1:

The average scores in the three parts of the test

class	C1	C2	C3	C4	Total
R40	31.18	29.68	30.02	29.76	30.18
L15	10.91	10.48	10.30	10.62	10.58
V15	9.26	8.98	9.11	9.00	9.09

class	T1	T2	T3	T4	Total
R40	30.64	29.34	28.46	29.82	29.56
L15	8.85	7.96	8.19	9.16	8.54
V15	8.45	7.88	8.34	8.20	8.22

Notes: 'R40', 'L15', and 'V15' mean full marks of reading, listening and vocabulary & structure are 40, 15 and 15. 'Total' refers to the average scores of the four classes in each group.

Table2:

The distribution of students in different score scopes

part	R<24 (24=60%)	R≥32 (32=80%)	L<9 (9=60%)	L≥12 (12=80%)	V<9 (9=60%)	V≥12 (12=80%)
C group	7	53	18	33	48	16
T group	9	43	66	10	68	4

Notes: The total student number in C group is 116, and that of T group was 118. The number in this Table is the number of students who scored in the specific scope.

In table 1, C1 represents class 1 of communicative group

C2 represents class 2 of communicative group

C3 represents class 3 of communicative group

C4 represents class 4 of communicative group

R40 means full marks of reading is 40

L15 means full marks of listening is 15

V15 means full marks of vocabulary and structures is 15

T1 represents class 1 of traditional grammar-translation group

T2 represents class 2 of traditional grammar-translation group

T3 represents class 3 of traditional grammar-translation group

T4 represents class 4 of traditional grammar-translation group

Compared with the ones of T-group, almost all the numbers of C-group were bigger except reading marks of C2 and C4 were smaller than those of T1 and T4.

Table 2 showed the numbers of the students in each group at the top and bottom.

The following was at the bottom: $R < 24$, $L < 9$, $V < 9$.

The others were at the top: $R \geq 32$, $L \geq 12$, $V \geq 12$.

Compared with the ones of T-group at the bottom, the number of C-group were small; compared with T-group at the top, the number of T-group were bigger.

Judging from the results of the test, students in C group did better than those in T group in almost all aspects. They were especially superior in listening, and slightly better in vocabulary. This does seem that a communicative approach can improve students' performance in examination and does not undermine their capacity to succeed in tests.

2. Tape record of the process with two approaches

From the audio record we could see the difference between the two classroom management with grammar-translation and communicative approaches. In the grammar-translation classes, the teachers' lectures took about 91% of the time in class. In the communicative classes, 64% of the time was spent in student-centred activities. Almost everyone had chance to speak English in the class.

3. Feedback

Comments on the training program were obtained for a group of college students just graduated from high school. All but one of 30 showed favourable attitude and acknowledged their progress in all of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills

during the three-month training. One student said the program made everyone in the class speak English. Students in classes with the grammar translation approach, just sat there nodding mechanically with no chance to use the English language , "we were just the robots our teacher trained." At the end of the first semester, three university supervisors observed the class with communicative approach and confirmed the active, motivating atmosphere and the positive, effective functions of it. The feedback from the 116 students, 85% of them said they liked the communicative approach better. Others doubted about it. Almost nobody seems to have actually interviewed the students themselves as to relevant to communicative and non-communicative activities.

Students' perceptions of communicative and
non-communicative activities in EFL classes

Rao (2002) investigated Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities and their difficulties in EFL classes that used CLT methods.

Research method

The case study explored Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in EFL classroom. The instruments include a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. 30 Chinese English-major college students were chosen at random from those exposed to CLT for completing a survey. 15 of them were sophomores and 15 were juniors, with 21 females and 9 males, ranging in age from 18 to 23. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A was about the students' background, English proficiency and their opinion of communicative and non-communicative activities in class. Part B was composed of 19 items asking about communicative and non-communicative activities. These questions related to student-student and student-teacher interactions, grammar activities, teachers' error-corrections and students' obedience to the teacher. Part C invited students to explain their difficulties in communicative activities in class. All students returned the questionnaire.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to obtain a better understanding of the students' perceptions and their difficulties in communicative activities in class, 10 of the 30 were selected for interview. 5 males and 5 females who were interviewed, 4 had good English proficiency, 3 fair and 3 poor. The questions were a series of predetermined and open-ended ones. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed word by word and then sent to the interviewees for verification

The data was examined after it was collected and analysed inductively. In this way the researchers identified the students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities as well as their difficulties in practising such activities.

Results

Although CLT was introduced into the Chinese EFL classes in the early 1980s, the traditional grammar method is still employed in most classes. The results of this study indicate why this is so.

The survey results showed that the students preferred non-communicative activities, compared with communicative ones although they liked a variety of class activities. Almost all students preferred teachers' grammatical explanations in English mother-tongue-avoidance strategy in class. Sometimes the lack of authentic English context and confidence in themselves prevent them from participating in communicative activities. Some dynamic, creative activities were welcomed by good English learners. All students thought it helpful for teachers to direct class discussions, and they were they were interested in authentic English materials, e.g. newspaper or magazine articles.

All students were interested in CLT methods in class, twenty-two of whom liked non-communicative activities better, and eight preferred communicative activities. All of them thought the combination of communicative and non-communicative activities was better. However, most students encountered difficulties caused by communicative activities. Some of them thought that these difficulties prevented them from taking part in dynamic activities in class.

Because of most examinations were grammar-based, and many students' motivations for learning of English was career-orientated. They didn't attach importance to communicative activities although they were interested in them. And 25 of 30 students thought they were used to the traditional grammar-translation

method which was teacher-centred, textbook-driven and emphasised rote memory. They consider their teachers were authority and reluctant to challenge them.

Some of them thought EFL was learnt only in the classroom and in other contexts it was not used broadly. 23 students regarded EFL as a constraint for communicative activities. In China, learners needn't use English in their daily life except in class. The students could not access a convenient English learning environment outside class which significantly would help them easily improve their communicative competence.

Many educational institutions in China did not have enough finance to equip with audio-visual laboratories, computers, overhead projectors or televisions to facilitate dynamic teaching/learning activities expected in communicative classes.

Discussion and Implications

The results of the studies seemed positive. Although most subjects were interested in CLT, some of them still worried about their examinations without teachers' detailed explanations in class. Most Chinese students lacked of learning autonomy and independence. They didn't realize they should be responsible for their own language learning not their teachers.

Perhaps Chinese EFL teachers should help students develop some language learning strategies and capacity to learn automatically and independently. Then they can have incentive to participate in communicative activities in class so that they can improve their communicative competence.

It also showed the examination and CLT are controversial in China. If we only have college English teaching reform not examination reform, maybe it's difficult to improve college students communicative competence. As examination are all grammar-based not more communicative, students hold negative attitude to CLT. And teachers are not confident enough about it for the examination results are not only the standard to assess a student's learning but a teacher's teaching as well (Zhu, 2003). So maybe in the future we need reform the exam system fundamentally and then we could hope we would be able to reform College English teaching successfully. At that time there will be a big plus while employing CLT in class.

Chinese students preferred a combination of communicative and non-communicative activities in class (Rao, 2002). No single teaching method can cope with everything relevant to the target language. Chinese teachers may facilitate their

students' English learning if they can develop a communicative approach that is suitable for Chinese context. While employing CLT in class, teachers might do the following.

According to Rao (2002), teachers may help their students understand the nature of language, the features of CLT, the function of the class, the role of the student and the teacher. Although students worry about grammar-based exams, CLT does not mean only speaking (Thompson, 1996) and does involve grammar instruction. However, students need to know that grammar is only a tool not the end while learning English.

Teachers might help students keep the balance between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Rao (2002) summarises that linguistic competence is one step for helping learners to improve their communicative competence, and it does not automatically result in communicative competence. Students have to take part in communicative practice actively in order to achieve the latter, e.g. role play, pair work, group discussion and then they would be able to build up both linguistic and communicative competence. It is important to integrate them both, not to neglect either.

While it may be important for English learners to practise in an authentic context, teachers could create environment for students to practise the language which give them some insights into real-life situations.

Teachers may help students to access authentic English language materials that could be from internet, international newspapers and magazines in order to provide students with authentic reading materials. Such materials offer students insight into other nations, peoples, cultures and everything relevant to language.

Conclusion

Some positive results has come out from the studies, however the conclusion may not be drown easily. CLT is by no means the final answer, and further studies are waiting for language teachers to conduct, college English teaching needs further reforming and some of the key issues have yet to be fully resolved. In order to ensure that these changes are not pushed aside in future developments, it seems essential to attempt to clear away misconceptions that might otherwise be used to damn them and CLT as a whole.

This paper has explored the communicative approach to College English by the contrastive study with the grammar-translation methods. Li (2003) summarises that judging from the feedback from students and the results of examinations, communicative approach was advantageous and favourable, it aroused their interest in English learning and developing their learner autonomy. So it might become a tendency for College English teaching. Or we still need to explore and try to find a suitable way in English class to help student develop their ability.

The students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities identify their difficulties in practising communicative activities in class. Although some study showed communicative approach is advantageous and factorable than traditional grammar-translation one, we might not come to a conclusion that CLT is suitable for all students in all areas in China. It will be significant for teachers to develop new teaching methods suitable for English teaching in China.

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