

Reconsideration on CLT in College English:

Theory and Practice

RECONSIDERATION SUR L'APPROCHE COMMUNICATIVE DANS L'ANGLAIS UNIVERSITAIRE :

THEORIE ET PRATIQUE

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Abstract: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is believed in many countries to be a successful method to train communicative competence, has been more widely talked about and practiced in college English teaching since its being first introduced in China in 1980s. However, during about 2 decades of practice, Communicative Language Teaching has met with some inevitable difficulties and barriers. Considering the current impossibility of removing those difficulties and barriers such as the unfavorable learning environment and inconsistent testing system within years, we suggest that an eclectic approach be brought into college English teaching as the present expedient. It is an integration of the revolutionary Communicative Language Teaching principles and traditional Grammar-Translation Method, in coordination with Computer-Assisted Language Learning.

Key words: communicative competence, Communicative Language Teaching, Grammar-Translation Method, Computer-Assisted Language Learning, Eclecticism

Résumé: L'approche communicative dans l'enseignement des langues, qui est considérée comme une méthode réussie d'exercer la compétence communicative, a été beaucoup discutée et pratiquée dans l'enseignement de l'anglais universitaire depuis son introduction en Chine dans les années 1980. Cependant, durant les deux décades de pratique, l'approche communicative a connu des difficultés et barrières inévitables. Etant donné l'impossibilité d'éliminer dans les prochaines années ces difficultés et barrières telles que l'environnement défavorable de l'apprentissage et le système de test inégal, nous proposons d'introduire l'approche éclectique comme expédient dans l'enseignement de l'anglais. C'est une intégration de l'approche communicative et la méthode traditionnelle de grammaire-traduction, qui a combiné aussi l'apprentissage des langues avec l'assistance de l'ordinateur.

Mots-Clés: compétence communicative, approche communicative, méthode de grammaire-traduction, apprentissage des langues avec l'assistance de l'ordinateur, éclectisme

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is believed to be an effective methods to train communicative competence, has been widely talked about and practiced in college English teaching ever since its being first introduced and applied in China in 1980s. It seems as if CLT, which has proved more successful than traditional methods overseas would have brought on a new look to our college English

teaching. However, over 20 years' practice of CLT to college English has not been so satisfactory as expected since many teachers and scholars have realized that the goal of developing communicative competence had far from reached. CLT is even labeled as an impossibility and failure to college English teaching in current China (Zhu Yijia, 2000). Why such a popular and convincing teaching method has confronted such confusion? Should we have no choice but stick to the former tradition (most possibly, the Grammar-Translation Method)? Or is there a reasonable way out of the dilemma?

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2. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND CLT THEORIES

For much of the 20th century, language teaching has been strongly influenced by Bloomfieldian theories and Structuralism where the principle focus has been on the grammar of the language (Nunan, 1991). GT Method, which has long and pleadingly found its way into Chinese college English classroom, is mainly structure-based and teacher-centered. Students depend too much on the teacher and can not cope with communicative tasks effectively though they are linguistically competent (Shu Baimei, 1992). A revolution in language teaching is therefore urgently called for. The theory of communicative competence and CLT fades in meeting this urgency.

In 1970s, Hymes delivered his famous article "On Communicative Competence" arguing that "there are several sectors of communicative competence, of which the grammatical is one". He then lists 4 sectors: grammaticality, feasibility, appropriateness and probability (Hymes, 1972).

Wilkins' *Notional Syllabus*(1976),Widdowson's *Teaching Language as Communication*(1978) and other linguists' contributions to CLT have made it popularized and widely spread first in Europe then all round the world. This is due to the characteristically advantageous features of CLT according to Brown(1987):

- 1st. to train a comprehensive language abilities not just grammar;
- 2nd. to base on function and meaning of language not only form;
- 3rd. to emphasize fluency rather than accuracy;
- 4th. to encourage students to use the target language as it is in a student-centered classroom.

This is also why CLT has excited many teachers as well as students after its being introduced to Chinese traditional classroom by which GT method had dominated for decades. In college English course, it has largely satisfied students' real needs and effectively improved our teaching (Wen Houyi, 1998).

3. DIFFICULTIES AND BARRIERS OF CLT TO COLLEGE ENGLISH IN CHINA

Though sound quite revolutionary and encouraging, CLT has encountered so many difficulties in college English classroom that the former tradition tends to recycle. A large scale survey reveals that 87.2% Of college English teachers find themselves spending most

of the time lecturing on grammar items and structural forms very often while only 27.6% of teachers assign group discussion and 15.7% of teachers release role-play (Zheng Shutang et al, 1996).

Why most college English teachers are reluctant to insist on group discussion and role-play, two of the typical classroom activities of CLT? Put Simply, It is not that they don't but they can't. There are at least two reasons for their not being capable of designing communicative activities in classroom. One is caused by the very disadvantage and weakness of CLT theory itself as pointed out by Tschimer (1996)---its overlaying on communicative competence and fluency while overlooking the grammatical competence. The other is mainly brought by the following two barriers existing once and still in our college English teaching practice under the real situation in China:

1st. unfavorable learning environment

The fundamental principles of CLT emphasize real, situational settings where students can accomplish varieties of communicative tasks by using the target language under the guidance of the teacher, who serves as a director and consultant. Such a college English classroom is too ideal to be true in most of the Chinese universities. The truth is, the classroom is as large as 50 to even 70 students, who have long since their high school formed a habit of sitting there silently to listen to the teacher and take notes. Teachers have to spend most of the time lecturing because they must finish 40 units in which contains a large number of difficult words, grammar items and texts within about 288 hours. Although the curriculum requires a 4-year non-stop college English course, most universities can only guarantee the first half. If the teachers arrange classroom activities such as discussions, role-play, etc., their teaching plan cannot be fulfilled. Even if some classroom activities are under way, students can only get few chances practicing their English since the time is so limited. No wonder that communicative activities in college English classrooms are far from sufficient and effective.

2nd. inconsistent testing

The backwash of testing on teaching and learning have so long been noticed and discussed. If a test is regarded as important, then preparation for it can come to dominate all teaching and learning activities; if the test contents and testing techniques are not variance with the objectives of the course, there is likely to be harmful backwash (Hughes, 1989).

In college English, both the achievement test (here, final-term exam) and the proficiency test (CET-4 and CET-6) are mainly structure-based, not really aiming at students' communicative competence. For more than 10 years, college English students are required to pass CET-4. Under such a heavy pressure, teachers as well as students find hard to spend their limited time on developing communicative competence that will not be

tested. Though CET has contributed a lot to Chinese college English teaching, the harmful backwash is still existing somewhat. That is maybe why a reform to CET is now being discussed and gradually undertaken.

4. RECONSIDERATION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 A long term reform

Since developing students' communicative competence and applying CLT to college English are both theoretically and urgently necessary, it seems as if what we are going to do now is to remove all those barriers mentioned above and simply replace the traditional teaching methods with CLT. Unfortunately it would be too naïve to expect that within a short time there will be an ideal language environment where students with a strong will and plenty of time can involve themselves in all kinds of communicative activities in a small classroom. Nor is it convincing that a real communicative test is soon capable of being delivered on a large scale. In 1990s, some of the Chinese scholars even concluded that CLT theory could be hardly suitable to Chinese practice while most people agreed that our research to CLT should only be done with full consideration of Chinese situation (Li Yujun, 2001). Anyway, it is rather acceptable to say that all the above expectation and assumption would be a long-term reform still with a big question mark.

4.2. The current suggestion as an expedient

4.2.1 Eclecticism between CLT and traditional methods

We have explored that most of the difficulties and barriers inhibiting the practice of CLT to college English can hardly be removed within years. A reconsideration should therefore be made in terms of what is the practically acceptable way-out of such a dilemma. Our suggestion is that current college English teaching follow a eclectic way which combines the most practical and convenient components of CLT with the strong and reasonable points of the traditional methods (namely Grammar-Translation Method). Actually in 1989, Professor Li Guanyi made a similar suggestion of teaching English majors which was proved effective. Grammar-Translation Method, though being criticized from a linguistic perspective, has been considered successful in terms of developing grammatical competence. So, we should make good use of GT method to help students to realize one of the important teaching goals of college English---a systematic knowledge of English grammar (that is also just one of the 4 sectors of communicative competence). As for the other 3 sectors, the leading communicative teaching

principles along with task-based, student-centered classroom activities should be carried on as much as possible. Accordingly, some communicative elements should be added to the testing system, either final test or CET.

4.2.2 CALL for help

As mentioned above, large classroom and limited time are two of the factors which make communicative activities in college English classrooms impossible or at least insufficient, because there is no chance and no time for students to interact with their teacher and classmates. How can students develop their communicative skills under such a silent, teacher-centered learning atmosphere? The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them (Littlewood, 1980). Up to now even to the near future, the problem of large classroom and limited time cannot be solved. But some actions should be taken instead of merely waiting for the final solution. We hereby put forward another suggestion that CALL be brought into college English teaching and learning as a useful, cooperative tool. Apart from its many advantages and revolutionary principles which are now well-recognized by linguists, researchers and educational authorities, the following two points may be of practical values:

Firstly, a carefully designed multimedia courseware in teaching vocabulary, grammatical items and other required knowledge instead of the traditional lecturing can be undoubtedly timesaving. Suppose we have 6 hours for each unit, an average teacher has to spend more than 3 hours on lecturing in traditional college English classroom. In multimedia classroom, it can be finished as effectively and more efficiently in about one hour. Students may have 2 more hours to involve themselves willingly and enthusiastically in a variety of classroom activities. Student-teacher relationship too can be improved consequently. According to Rosenbaum's estimate (1968), a student in a 15-member class may have 5 personal interactions with the teacher during a 50-minute class, when working with a computer the figure is at least 10 times greater; and for the efficacy of CALL over a whole range of learning activities, Atkinson(1968), Morriss & Adams(1968) and Rosenbaum(1968) all report significantly improved performance from CAI students in almost all areas of learning tasks (Ahmad, 1985).

In addition to the more frequently conducted classroom interaction, CALL along with networks can also present colorful extracurriculum communicative activities inside and outside of the classroom. Inside the classroom, multimedia materials selected by the teacher build up a more favorable, real language environment in which students are motivated to carry on situational, meaningful language input and output. Outside the classroom, students are likely to widen their eye span through discs and web pages; enrich their listening,

speaking and writing experience by Chat, E-mail or BBS so on and so forth.

All these are possible because most universities have already set up many CALL labs and multimedia classrooms; more and more families can afford computers and networks; and long-distance education are available to more and more people in China.

5. CONCLUSION

As far as we have explored, there is an urgent challenge

for training college English students' communicative competence not only from a linguistic perspective but also for its practical value. However, both the teachers and students have met with some inevitable difficulties and barriers during 20 years of practice of college English teaching in China. Considering the current impossibility of changing the unfavorable learning environment and inconsistent testing system within years, we suggest that an eclectic approach be brought into college English teaching. It is an integration of revolutionary CLT principles and some valuable elements in traditional methods, assisted by modern educational technology especially computer and networks.

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