

An Analysis of the Communicative Language Teaching, An English Language Lesson and Related Teaching Materials

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Abstract: Methods of language teaching have been widely discussed to stimulate students' English learning interest and language communicative competence, with communicative language teaching (CLT) in particular, while the application and analysis of CLT in classroom practice and specific English teaching materials are still rare. The purpose of this article is to explore communicative language teaching and its application in an English language lesson and related teaching materials together with other theories and approaches of language acquisition.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Application; English Language Lesson; English Teaching Materials

Introduction

Language is in nature and under most circumstances a tool for communication, so the basic ability ESL students should have after years of learning English is communicating with people using English. However, there are Chinese students who have studied English for years but can only speak a few words ^[10]. They failed to develop a general fluency in speaking and oral English understanding ^[38]. As a second language learner of English, I have been exposed to communicative language teaching (CLT) outside school in a language educational center and my English speaking improved significantly during that learning period. Therefore, I want to explore CLT and its effectiveness in classroom application.

The aim of this article is to explore communicative language teaching and its application in an English language lesson and related teaching materials together with other theories and approaches of language acquisition. The first part starts with the introduction of communicative language teaching in terms of its background, main principles, limitations and application. The second part analyses and reflects on an English language lesson. Then in the third part, an English textbook is reviewed with engagement of language theories and approaches.

1. Communicative Language Teaching

1.1 Background

Communicative language teaching originated from changing British language teaching tradition and changing educational realities in Europe. Changes in British language teaching started from the late 1960s when British applied linguists began to question the theoretical assumptions behind Situational Language Teaching. Before the late 1960s, the main British approach to EFL teaching was Situational Language Teaching, in which teaching language meant practicing basic structures in meaningful and situational activities ^[29]. However, as Howart said:

There was no future in continuing to pursue the chimera of predicting language on the basis of situational events. What was required was a closer study of the language itself and a return to the traditional concept that utterances carried meaning in themselves and expressed the meanings and intentions of the speakers and writers who created them ^[19].

The structural theories of language teaching at that time failed to reach certain fundamental aspects of language such as individual sentence's creativity and uniqueness and the functional and communicative feature of language. Thus, it is necessary to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency instead of mere mastery of structures ^[29].

Educational realities also changed in Europe, as European countries became increasingly interdependent on each other, which called for teaching of major languages of the European Common Market. The Council of Europe examined the problem and pri-

ortized the need to develop alternative approaches to language teaching. Examination and investigation were started in 1971 by a group of experts. They studied European language learners' needs and used an early document of Wilkins^[36], a British linguist, whose document proposed the functional or communicative aspect of language which could be considered as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. Later, Wilkins expanded his document written in 1972 into a book, *Notional Syllabuses*^[37], which significantly affected the development of Communicative Language Teaching. Wilkins's communicative analysis was incorporated into specifications for a threshold level communicative language syllabus, which have greatly impacted on designing communicative language lessons and textbooks in Europe^[34].

Since the mid-1970s, CLT has no longer been a mere British innovation, but has disseminated and expanded greatly. For this approach, the primary goal of language teaching and learning becomes communicative competence rather than linguistic competence alone^[4] and the teaching of the four language skills acknowledges the interdependence of language and communication^[29].

1.2 Main Principles

1.2.1 Four Communicative Competence

The conception of communicative competence as the main purpose of language teaching distinguishes CLT from the more traditional language teaching methods^[4]. According to Canale and Swain^[6], communicative competence included four dimensions: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is related to knowledge of the linguistic system such as grammatical rules, vocabulary and phonology. With grammatical competence, learners can express accurately the literal meaning of their sentences and reach the goal of communicative approach. Sociolinguistic competence focuses on the communicative functions and appropriate attitude and register that are reflected in a particular grammatical form within a given social and cultural context depending on contextual elements such as topic, purpose for interaction, role relationship, setting, and norms of interaction. Discourse competence refers to the interpretation of individual elements of a piece of discourse in terms of their interconnectedness and their relationship to the entire discourse. Strategic competence is about the ability to exert different strategies to complete communication, which includes initiating, ending, maintaining and redirecting communication. Without knowledge in the four dimensions of communicative competence, second language learner cannot reach sufficient communicative competence level.

1.2.2 Roles of Learner and Teacher

As Communicative Language Teaching highlights communication, learner and teacher's role in CLT are different from that in traditional second language teaching environment. In CLT, class tends to be more learner-centered. Design of instruction and guidance is based on individual learners' interests, styles, needs, and goals^[29]. Teachers are encouraged to apply and develop learning materials "on the basis of the particular needs manifested by the class"^[2].

According to Breen and Candlin, learners' role under CLT is defined as:

The role of learner as negotiator – between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning – emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way^[3].

Under CLT, teachers tend to have multiple roles. Breen and Candlin listed two main roles:

The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group^[3].

Other roles teachers may have are needs analyst, counselor and group process manager^[29]. As a needs analyst, teachers are responsible for reacting to learners' language needs through solving students' problems such as their learning styles, learning strategies and learning goals. In the role of a counselor, teachers are more like an effective communicator who needs to interpret and understand speaker's intention, respond and confirm from time to time and give feedbacks to the speaker. Being a group process manager, teachers have to be an organizer of the classroom to create a communication environment and plan more communicative activities. Therefore, with more communication involved, the teaching and learning on CLT class become less teacher-centered and more learner-centered.

1.2.3 Two Versions

Communicative Language Teaching approach has experienced two versions: a 'strong' version and a 'weak' version. Howatt^[19] suggests that these two versions have the similar objectives but show differences in ways of learning second language. According to Howatt^[19], "In the last ten years, the weak version has become more or less standard practice". It encourages learners to use English to communicate and involves communicative activities in language teaching. On the contrary, the strong version assumes that language is in most cases acquired through communication, which requires learners to use English to develop their language knowledge.

The use of these two versions in CLT becomes more complicated. Currently, the weak forms have increasingly applied communicative language use into classroom, while the strong forms have increasingly put attention on incorporating form and language awareness into classroom practice [35].

1.2.4 Meaning, Context and Authentic Language

In communicative language teaching, meaning is significant and many researchers who support communicative approach have focused their studies on the nature and appropriateness of meanings in certain contexts [28]. Take Wilkins [37] as an example. He divided communicative meanings into two types, known as 'notional categories' and 'communicative function categories' respectively. The first refers to concept such as time, order, location, quantity and frequency and the second refers to requests, offers, denials, complaints and persuasions. As meaning and context are central to language learning in communicative language teaching, syllabus is designed and developed based on the concept of notions and functions.

In communicative language teaching, meaning can be expressed through authentic language, which is a vehicle of daily communication from conversation, newspapers, books, radio broadcasts, menus, schedules, advertisement and so on. Authentic language is often based on a context and is part of a larger communicative context. Communicative language teaching promotes authentic conversation and learners through communicating with their partners can get verbal and non-verbal feedbacks such as body language, expressions of confusion, doubt and anger, which not only provides them with a real communicative environment, but also gives them a chance to evaluate whether their communication is successful or not [28].

1.3 Application in the Classroom

Communicative Language Teaching has spread to different parts of the world and been widely applied to classroom practice. Main coursebooks started to include richer topics for language training, communicative activities and sections devoted to language in use [16]. Advocates of CLT encourage the use of "authentic" and "from-life" materials in the classroom, which include language-based realia (e.g. newspapers, advertisement and magazines) and graphic and visual sources (e.g. graphs, charts and maps). Real objects such as plastic models can also be used to support communication [29]. In communicative activities, students would like to communicate with a purpose. For example, they try to narrow the information gap between themselves and their relevant communicators. Instead of using one specific language form, students emphasize the content of their conversation by using a variety of language and teachers would not intervene the activity in order to replicate real communication [16]. The major activity types used in communicative language teaching are "functional communication activities" and "social interaction activities" [24]. Functional communication activities such as comparing pictures and finding out similarities and differences, putting pictures in sequence and following instructions to find ways on a map can be applied in class to motivate learners and create a communicative environment. Social interaction activities such as dialogues, group discussions, role plays, games and debates can be a supplement to those functional communication activities mentioned above to support CLT classes [29].

1.4 Evaluation

1.4.1 Effectiveness

Communicative language teaching shifts the traditional teacher-centered classroom with little communication into a communicative student-centered classroom which encourages creativity and innovation. With changes in classroom roles, teachers create more opportunities for students to communicate and students are encouraged to do more pair work and group activity. In traditional teacher-centered classroom, desks and chairs are aligned. Now by moving chairs and desks around to complete group work, the classroom organization has changed and thus more freedom is given to both students and teachers. Besides, new organization and roles in classroom mean that learners themselves have to take more responsibility for their own learning, which involves more planning, evaluation and participation, as communicative classroom requires self-directed behaviors [28].

More realistic communication is mimicked in CLT classroom. For example, learners are asked about the departure and arrival time of planes, the direction to a place and their preferred food. Through practicing these conversations, communicative approach stimulates learners' need to communicate and enhances their problem-solving ability to access and select relevant information. Moreover, communicative approach requires cooperation and teamwork to discuss and make a final decision, which can help improve learners' social and interpersonal skills [28].

1.4.2 Limitations

Although communicative language teaching has been put forward and applied worldwide for a long time, there are still some limitations. Firstly, without a focus on text and grammar rules in CLT classroom, the classroom arrangement does not follow certain standards. As Richards and Rodgers [29] said, "students are expected to interact primarily with each other rather than with the teacher, and correction of errors may be absent or infrequent". Secondly, different from traditional language teaching approach which requires

rare communication and only individual work, communicative language teaching requires much communication and cooperation, which is probably not familiar to learners. According to Henner-Stanchina and Rileyn ^[18], lack of knowledge in what teaching and learning should be like can lead to learner confusion and resentment. Without special training in conducting communicative language teaching, teachers may also feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable, as traditional teaching emphasizes accuracy and error correction rather than fluency. Teachers also concern that imperfect modeling and errors made by students may have an adverse impact in pair or group work ^[29].

1.5 Reflection

Nowadays, communicative language teaching is considered as one of the hottest directions in ESL teaching. Most modern methods and techniques put emphasis on it and most textbooks and materials are designed for it ^[1]. However, CLT still has its limitations and constraints in terms of its application in certain countries such as China. As long as exams continue to focus on language items rather than communicating ability, students would still learn English for test-oriented purpose instead of communicative purpose. Besides, large-scale class and limited instructional time are regarded as major impediments for implementing Communicative Language Teaching in Asia ^{[22][27][30]}. It is difficult to plan and introduce communicative and interactive activities and to ensure everyone's participation in large size classes.

Class-size should be taken into consideration and feasible activities that can involve more students should be wisely chosen. For example, a large-scale class can be divided into small groups in which everyone should have a role to play or an idea to share. A group leader with a good command of English language should also be chosen to ensure the completion of each one's task and to help teacher with some error correction work.

Besides, traditional methods of teaching linguistic knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary should not be neglected. Inspired by Griffiths and Parr ^[15] who suggest "it may be more useful to view 'traditional' methods as complementary to 'communicative approaches'", the combination of communicative language teaching with some not so communicative activities in class is also a necessity.

2. Analysis of an English Lesson

This part is an analysis of an English lesson observed outside school in a language educational center. This language educational center focuses on training learners' speaking skills together with improving their listening skills, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Learners at this language center vary from teenagers to adults. The main teaching approach adopted there is communicative language teaching, as training speaking skills is its focus, but there are also other language acquisition theories and approaches used throughout language teaching process. The lesson is overviewed, analyzed in detail and reflected on its strengths and weaknesses.

2.1 Lesson Overview

The class was an oral English class taught by a native English teacher from America named Austin. Each class lasts for 60 minutes with four students and has a language point or topic to learn to help students practice English speaking and at the same time listening, reading and writing in a more communicative environment. In this chosen class, there were two high school students, one university student and one adult working in a company. The focus on this class was learning English expressions in describing diagrams and pie charts. The objectives for students were to explain diagrams and pie charts, speculate about the future and analyze and compare data from tables.

Austin started with a warm-up activity which lasted for around 10 minutes. During the 10-minute period, he first had a chat with each student asking about their recent life, study and work. Then he wrote the following words 'increase', 'decrease' and 'stay the same' on board and asked students to describe these three trends with other expressions. Students gave synonyms such as 'rise', 'drop' and 'level off'.

In the second part, Austin distributed handouts with charts to students and asked them to explain one of the charts by stating what the chart is and how data displayed in the chart changes. After one student gave the explanation, other students asked questions based on the information in the chart. All four students had a chance to explain their charts and answered questions raised by their classmates. Austin gave feedbacks and corrected some errors made by students after they finished their explanation.

In the next part, they had a discussion about how they spend their money. After giving his example of "I probably spend a little more than 30% of my salary on entertainment", Austin asked students to use approximations like 'around', 'approximately', 'nearly' and 'well over' to speculate the amount of money they spend.

Then in the last part, Austin gave each student a new chart and asked them to make a 2-minute presentation in terms of the information in the chart. Students were also asked to compare different age groups shown in the charts by using expressions such as

'less than', 'more than' and 'as much as' in their presentation. All four students had an opportunity to stand in front of the class and present their ideas. They were given full autonomy to draw charts and write data on board to help illustrate their opinions.

After students had finished their presentations, Austin gave comments in terms of their expressions, pronunciation and public speaking skills. At the end of each class, students would also receive written feedbacks on their performance in class.

2.2 Lesson Analysis

Focusing on speaking, this oral English class aimed at improving students' output. As Swain^[31] hypothesized, producing comprehensible output pushes learners ahead in their language learning development. She advocated more chances for learners in verbal production. During this class, students were given enough opportunities to speak, which ensured the production of knowledge they have learned. In this class, with native American teacher Austin's presence, only targeted language was allowed to be used. This reflected certain features of a 'natural' method or the Direct Method which gave priority to oral skills, refused to teach grammar explicitly and immersed learners in targeted language^[33].

At the beginning of the class, Austin used some warm-up exercises to familiarize students with English-speaking environment and related topics they were going to talk in class. First, through chatting with each student on their recent life, Austin activated students' interest and motivated them to speak more in class. Then students were asked to describe three trends with synonyms they knew. By doing so, they had to retrieve previously learned knowledge and related what they have learned to new information in class. According to Carrell^[8], this is known as schemata theory, which emphasizes the role of background knowledge in language learning by adopting schema as a cognitive framework. As a result, new knowledge will gradually fit into the previously stored schemata during language acquisition process^{[7][8][20]}.

In the second activity, each student explained their chart and then answered questions raised by the other three students. As Gass^[14] suggested, a learning process begins when learners notice something in second language that differs from their expectations or that fills a gap in their language knowledge. By questioning and solving problems, students were offered greater chance to learn from each other, notice and narrow the knowledge gap between each other, especially when they had different learning backgrounds and occupations, with three students and one adult working in a company. Besides, while students were explaining their charts, Austin was listening and at the same time noting down any mistake students made and corrected them after Question and Answer part. Learners need unambiguous messages as to their accuracy, which traditionally takes the form of correction^[33]. Also according to Ferris^[13], corrective feedback has a positive impact on error correction. By giving feedback afterwards, Austin ensured both the fluency and accuracy of students and helped students correct their mistakes on time.

According to Swain^[32], language use and language learning can co-occur in collaborative dialogues. In the third activity, students had a group discussion or did collaborative work, which promoted their language learning. Then Austin gave an example of how he spends his money and asked students to speculate their own amount of money spent. This can be regarded as an inductive approach, in which learners study examples and get familiar with the rule from these examples. Rules discovered by learners themselves are more easily to be accepted and understood and are more meaningful, memorable and serviceable^[33].

Throughout the whole class, the learning environment was communicative and student-centered. This complied with Communicative Language Teaching, in which language is learned to be used and students learn to communicate by communicating (Ibid.). Communicative activities used in this class included dialogue, group discussion and presentation. In these activities, every student had enough chance to present ideas and practice their English speaking, which ensured that students spoke for most of the time in class. Therefore, students played a leading role in this class and was given full autonomy of interaction and communication.

2.3 Reflection

In addition to strengths mentioned above, the small size of class was another advantage. With only four students in each class, the time and opportunity for speaking, interaction and communication were guaranteed. Every student's participation was required for the completion of class. Thus, students were less likely to be distracted and could make more contributions to class. Moreover, as different learners will differ in their reaction to the same learning conditions^[23], focus on individual student is required. This class was rather flexible and student-tailored, as teacher could take account of individual student and give personal feedback on their performance in class.

However, this small size of class is rare and impossible in normal class at schools. It is effective in this language educational center but inapplicable to normal schools where there are usually more than 40 students in a class and where instructional hours is limited. Teachers should try to create a learning environment with various activities to guarantee the successful learning of learners with different abilities and preferences. Besides, as there is strong evidence that differences in learning outcomes are associated with age (Ibid.), the wide age range of students in the same oral English class might affect their language learning.

3. Review of English Teaching Materials

This part is a review of an English textbook called Cutting-Edge Starter Students' Book ^[11]. Cutting-Edge developers claimed that Cutting-Edge textbooks are based on communicative language teaching ^[12], which is related to the teaching approach outlined in part one. Besides, the textbook also involves other language teaching theories and approaches. I will first introduce relevant information about the textbook and then analyze its advantages and disadvantages.

3.1 Textbook Overview

The new Cutting-Edge series includes twelve books in general. This Starter book is written by Sarah Cunningham, Peter Moor, Chris Redston and Araminta Crace. It contains 12 units, with each unit comprising Grammar focus, Vocabulary, Listening or Reading Skills, Pronunciation, Task, Language Live and Study, Practice & Remember. The topic of units covers Going Places, Home and Family, Travel and so on. I will introduce Unit 4 "AROUND TOWN", the main purpose of which is to learn vocabulary of places and grammar of 'preposition of place', 'there is' and 'there are'.

Two Vocabulary parts are arranged separately, with one at the beginning and another together with reading part. Both two parts ask students to match the listed words with pictures, which helps students see its relevance to daily life and activates their schemata. Later, the exercises of categorizing and choosing are given, which helps teachers assess and check students' understanding of vocabulary.

There are three Grammar focus parts in unit four. The content is about 'preposition of place', 'there is' and 'there are'. Each part consists of grammar introducing, drills and practice. Grammar introducing involves pictures as a visual aid to help clarify meaning. For example, in teaching prepositions of place, pictures depict the prepositional relations to help remove a potential ambiguity ^[17]. Also with sentence examples clearly and concisely listed in each part, inductive approach is used here to teach grammar. According to Thornbury ^[33], this approach involves mental effort which ensures greater cognitive depth and memorability. Students need to write and speak out their own sentences to practice grammar they have learned. This helps consolidate their knowledge. Also by comparing their sentences, students work in pairs and have a chance to interact with each other.

Pronunciation part is placed in Vocabulary and Grammar focus part, which helps students strengthen pronunciation practice. By listening and proper exercise, they acquire pronunciation ^[25]. Besides, the Pronunciation part asks students to mark the stress and listen to the pronunciation of th- in words like 'there' and 'they'. This can be considered as a bottom-up skill, "in which the understanding of the 'heard' language is worked out proceeding from sounds to words to grammatical relationships in lexical meanings" ^[26]. It helps students recognize them in listening and also outside classroom.

Task and Language Live parts use more authentic materials, including pictures of beautiful scenery and videos. By incorporating authentic four language skills, students can use language in vivid and real-life situation and enhance their motivation ^{[9][21]}. Furthermore, these two parts involve more practice of speaking and writing, which to some extent reflects an idea of output hypothesis. As Swain ^[31] said, language output of L2 can help learners use language fluently and accurately. Study, Practice & Remember part is put at the end of the textbook together with other units', with learned grammar rules listed above language exercises.

3.2 Advantages

As a new edition textbook, Cutting-Edge Starter has many advantages. Firstly, it covers a wide range of topics from self-introduction to countries, family, time, travel and customs, which can expose learners to different perspectives of language use in everyday life. Secondly, it involves and aims to cultivate comprehensive language skills and ability. Each unit incorporates learning and practicing of all four language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). With two whole parts (Task and Language Live) focusing on speaking and writing, it helps create a learner-centered and communicative environment and shows emphasis on both language input and output. Thirdly, the using of authentic pictures and videos not only arouses interest of learners, but also makes the content more understandable and memorable ^[17]. Lastly, by setting separate practice part at the end of the textbook, more space is saved for other activities in the main unit. As a result, students can participate in more activities in class and also be exposed to enough exercises.

3.3 Disadvantages

In spite of the advantages mentioned above, problems of this textbook still exist. On the one hand, with a purpose of practicing all four language skills in the textbook, students can develop comprehensive language learning ability. On the other, it might lead to a lack of focus. Having limited time to practice and then master each skill, students might fail to achieve any of the four skills. It is also hard for teachers to allocate and control time in class when there are too much tasks and language points to cover. Besides, as a textbook based on communicative language teaching, the type and time of activities shown in this textbook are still limited. Although it includes pair work and group discussion, which is taken as the most suitable techniques to be applied in language courses ^[5], the time for individual task still accounts for a large proportion of total time in class. Activities such as games, role-play, simulation and

debate should also be incorporated into language lesson.

4 . Conclusion

In conclusion, communicative language teaching is still considered as an effective way of teaching second language with an aim to cultivate overall language ability and a focus on enhancing language communicative skills. However, the real application of communicative language teaching should be moved beyond discussion and encouraged in everyday classroom practice. Through certain training, schools and teachers should actively learn from model communicative classes and consciously cultivate learners' communicative skills to use English as a language. Moreover, teaching materials or textbooks should also be well-researched and planned before each class to achieve an effective communicative classroom environment.

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