

## An Analysis of Communicative Language Teaching Methodology and Its Application on Language Learning in China

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### Abstract

This paper mainly introduces the prevalent methodology which is known as Communicative Language Teaching, or CLT. The origins and evolution of the methodology are firstly introduced. Through analyzing its major principles and approaches, the paper examines how the CLT methodology influences approaches to language teaching today. From the analysis, the CLT methodology does help to raise language learners' interests and advance their learning efficiency. However, in the process of applying the CLT method in English classrooms of China, it is constrained by some factors in terms of the different language and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the paper illustrates these problems which lead to the limitations of CLT application in China and also provide the solutions on how to integrate traditional teaching methodologies with communicative language teaching method in English classes in China.

**Key words:** CLT methodology (Communicative Language Teaching); Communicative competence; ESL (English as a Second Language)

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### INTRODUCTION

Due to the rapid economic development and globalization, the need for good communication skills in English has been increasingly higher. People around the world are eager to improve their proficiency of English and it is true that today there are various opportunities to learn the English, such as through school's formal instruction, the internet and media or study abroad, etc. The growing need for English learning has directly led in the huge demand for English teaching. Therefore, a number of teaching methodologies have been proposed by language scholars and educators. The CLT is among them. Since its establishment in the 1970s, the CLT methodology has been very popular among English learners and is becoming a predominant teaching methodology today. The CLT method mainly aims to promote the communicative competence of learners and it has incredibly influenced the approaches of English learning and teaching. Furthermore, there is a trend in China that English teachers are trying to adopt the CLT method in English classrooms. However, the process of applying the CLT method in China seems to be constrained by some limitations because of the different backgrounds. This paper explores about whether it is impossible to adopt the CLT methodology in English classrooms in China.

### 1. THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF COMMUNICATION LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY

CLT is an essential language teaching methodology which was first proposed in the 1970s. It aims to promote language learners' communication competence and is one of the most prevailing teaching methods around the world.

There are certain reasons why the CLT method could be established at that point. Firstly, during the 1970s and early 1980s, due to the economic development and

widespread migration in Europe and the United State, there was a huge demand for language learning. People wanted to master a foreign language and achieve higher levels of fluency and accuracy in language. Secondly, the CLT method is a response to the traditional language teaching method. Before the CLT methodology was adopted by people, teachers normally used methods such as grammar-translation, audio-lingual method, etc. which attach more importance to language patterns and structures. Educators at that time began to doubt whether these methods were the most appropriate to teach students how to master a language because teachers found that their students were able to produce correct sentences in classrooms, but they could not use them appropriately in an authentic conversation outside classrooms. Most students were “structurally competent but communicatively incompetent” (Ma, 2003, p.101). Therefore, based on the limitations of the former teaching methods, the CLT approach was developed.

The CLT method chiefly aimed to improve the language learners’ communicative competence. It pays more attention to the use of language and the learner’s role, which provide learners more chances to use the language and practice their competence in dealing with communication in the real world. Due to its evident advantages that complement the traditional ones, it gained popularity quickly once its establishment.

## 2. THEORIES AND PRINCIPLES OF CLT METHOD

The CLT methodology pays attention to cultivating language learners’ communicative competence, a concept that was developed by American linguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes. He claimed that knowing a language is not only mastering grammatical structures and forms, but also using them appropriately in different social settings. Communicative competence, from Hymes’ point of view, was “knowing when and how to say what to whom”. Hymes (1972) proposed that the notion of communication competence contains four parameters: the degree of possibility, feasibility, appropriateness, and occurrence.

When it comes to the communicative competence, the other relative concept linguistic competence which was proposed by Noam Chomsky cannot be avoided. The linguistic competence primarily refers to learners’ ability of producing sentences in a target language and the knowledge of how sentences are formed. It is true that linguistic competence is one of the most important aspects of language learning, but evidently only knowledge of grammar is not enough for a qualified language learner. Even though students have a good mastery of sentence formations, they still cannot apply them to communicate with others effectively and successfully. Therefore,

it is not difficult to conclude that the communicative competence is also indispensable for successful language learners.

The CLT method is normally assumed to be superior to former language teaching methods such as, grammar-translation method, audio-lingual method, etc. The primary reason is that rather than emphasis on linguistic forms and structures, CLT method aims to improve learners’ communicative competence in interactive situations of real life. It enables language learners to apply meaningful language in authentic contexts. Unlike the traditional teacher-centered way of teaching, CLT is a learner-centered and task-based method. Students are required to participate in numerous classroom activities in order to develop their communication ability. It encourages learners’ imagination, participation, and cooperation with others in the process of language learning. Both the language input and classroom activities are designed and selected according to the students’ learning needs. Communicative activities and tasks are predominate parts of the teaching schedule and curriculum design. David Nunan (1991, p.78) defined the CLT method with the following five principles:

- 1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- 2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- 3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also the learning process itself.
- 4) An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experience as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- 5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

These five principles are claimed by CLT method supporters to show that they are not only concerned about learners’ needs and desires, but also the connection between the learning and using of language.

Nunan (1991) also argued that communicative competence, as opposed to the traditional language-centered approaches, contains four aspects: linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. When language teachers are designing the syllabus, all these elements should be taken into consideration so that the CLT method can be carried out successfully and effectively. According to Richards (2006, p.7), “knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions; knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants; knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts; knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge” is the major aim that language teachers should include in the classroom.

From the above illustrations, many researchers have studied and discussed the communicative language

teaching method, but different researchers explain it in various ways according to their different angles. It is, however, commonly believed that “the CLT method is a way of language teaching which features the application of communicative activities and target language with the aim to develop learners’ competence of understanding and exchanging different ideas, behavioral modes, values, beliefs and cultures (Berns, 1990).

### 3. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN TRADITIONAL TEACHING AND THE CLT METHODS

The traditional teaching approaches like audio-lingual and grammar-translation method are mainly centered on grammatical competence before the CLT method comes out. The process of language learning was considered as a mechanical habit formation. Language learners cultivated good habits by producing correct sentences without making mistakes. Thus, correcting learners’ mistakes at the beginning stage of learning was indispensable and essential. Accurate pronunciation and accurate mastery of grammatical knowledge were assumed very crucial to learners, which could help them cultivate the good habits. In traditional language teaching methods, language learners usually got knowledge of grammar by memorizing various dialogues and practicing drills. The whole process of learning was totally controlled by the teachers. In other words, the classroom was mainly dominated by teachers and the process of learning and teaching was teacher-centered, which is totally separate from the CLT method.

This view is in contrast with the CLT approach where communicative competence is the primary goal. The CLT method, as a relatively new way of language teaching has its specific characteristics. First of all, in the process of using the CLT method in a classroom, the “authentic language,” which is the language used in the real world, should be used. Second, communication is also emphasized rather than the only mastery of language forms during the language course. Students should be provided the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts and have choices about what to say, as well as how to say it. Third, students’ errors should not be corrected, but should be pointed out teachers. The reason is because in CLT methodology, language learners’ errors are just seen as a natural consequence of developing communication, where fluency is considered as more important element than the accuracy. According to the CLT principles, learning language is a process of creative construction where trial and error cannot be avoided. Thus the teachers do not need to correct the students’ language mistakes immediately in the communicative class. They think that during the process of learning, the mistakes made by the learners can be tolerated. Some researchers

insist that there is no need to correct the mistakes as long as the communication is not affected.

### 4. ROLES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN CLT METHOD CLASSROOMS

The role of the teacher in the CLT method is a facilitator, an advisor, and a communicator. A teacher in a CLT class should facilitate communicative activities and create situations to promote communication. During the process of activities, the teacher is an advisor who is responsible for answering students’ questions and monitoring learners’ performances. Additionally, the teacher also serves as a communicator who can participate in conversations with students. The role of students in language learning classrooms is just a communicator. They join in communication by their own initiative, trying their best to interact with each other in the target language. From this point, it can be seen that the CLT is obviously a learner-centered method and the teacher does not play the dominant role in the class any more. Students are required to be more responsible for their own learning. Students in a CLT class are assumed to be more motivated and initiative, for they feel that they are learning something that is useful and beneficial, and they are more secure and confident as they are provided more opportunities to cooperate and interact with other students.

Students’ native language is allowed to be used appropriately. Teachers, in contrast, should try to use the target language both in the process of communicative activities and in giving directions of activities so students realize that the target language is just the means of communication, not the object or goal in language learning. It is notable to mention the fact that the most predominant characteristic of CLT is that all the activities contribute to students’ communicative skills. Students learn how to use the target language primarily through communicative activities like role-plays, games, task-based questions, etc..

According to Morrow (cited in Freeman, 2000), the activities carried out in a CLT classroom have mainly three features which are information gap, choice, and feedback. Information gap, according to Freeman (2000), refers to when one person in a conversation knows some information which the other does not. It cannot really be called communication if both sides already know the information they are going to talk about. Moreover, in a conversation, it is necessary that the listeners provide feedback to the speakers so that they can evaluate whether their information is expressed clearly, otherwise it cannot be real communication. Furthermore, the CLT method is normally carried out in small classes, for small-sized classes are beneficial to students who have more opportunities and time to

communicate using the target language. Therefore, a small number of students are much more suitable to adopt the learner-centered method.

## 5. THE BACKGROUND AND APPLICATION OF CLT METHOD IN CHINA

Compared to the communicative language teaching method, the traditional grammar-focused methodology is far more popular in China. A majority of Chinese English teachers tend to adopt the traditional methodologies in their class.

The primary reason is that for Chinese English learners, English is regarded as no more than an essential compulsory foreign language course. They put massive effort on English learning mainly because of the pressure of vital examinations, such as the Matriculation English Test or the College English Tests (CET), CET4 and CET 6. These tests are mostly paper based and test students' language skills in listening, reading, and writing. In particular, the grammar and structure tests are much more emphasized. Thus Chinese students are more concerned with grammatical knowledge and language accuracy in order to get high scores on these examinations.

In order to help students pass the exam and get a decent mark, teachers prefer to employ the traditional methods, such as the grammar-translation method and pay more attention to memorizing vocabulary, sentences structures, and grammatical rules. They are afraid that the students cannot master adequate grammar knowledge which may lead to the low pass rate of the examination and even have a harmful influence on their future development. Therefore, students learn English primarily by rote learning, memorizing fixed grammatical patterns, and practicing large amounts of drills, etc.. With this regard, the outcome of the CLT method does not appear to satisfy the students' needs.

However, under the traditional teaching method, students almost have no competence in communicating with native speakers in real language settings after graduation. If the students cannot apply English to interact with others and put it into practical use, then it is not an exaggeration to say that the English which students have learned in school is much more like deaf-and-dumb English. Meanwhile, with the rapid development of economics and globalization, the requirements for English competence of college students are increasingly higher than before. These days, the university graduates who equip with high language communication competence are much more competitive and can easily get their ideal jobs. The CLT method is an efficient method to promote students' communicative competence compared to the traditional methodologies. In addition, it is undeniable that the CLT method is a creative way for teaching language to stir learners' interests and enable students to

engage in language learning actively and confidently. It is acknowledged that the grammar-focused methods are easily inclined to make students board in terms of the large amount of grammar and pattern drills based on the content of textbooks. The CLT method, however, takes the communicative functions of language into consideration and regards the learning of language as the learning of communicating. By using the communicative teaching method in classrooms, language learners can communicate with others both in written form and orally in light of their own needs (Brown, 2001).

Hence it is really necessary for teachers to adjust their teaching methods in order to enable Chinese learners to master the practical use of English rather than only the structures and forms of language. In order to achieve this goal, English teachers need to apply the CLT methodology in their classes and teach students of language in communicative situations.

## 6. PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS IN CARRYING OUT THE CLT METHOD IN CHINA

It is true that the CLT method aims to promote students' communicative competence and improve their learning efficiency. However, carrying out CLT in China is limited and constrained to some extent. The CLT method is relatively abstract to students who have been used to the traditional teaching method. For example, some students hold that there is no specific content if there is no vocabulary memorizing tasks, explanations of grammar rules, or textbook based illustrations. Thus it may take time and effort for Chinese students to adapt to the CLT method.

Another reason is due to the different values, traditions, and cultures between Chinese and English speaking countries. Most Chinese students are introverted and are not willing to express their ideas with others. They are influenced by the traditional culture of confucianism which believes in compromise between people. Students may worry about losing face or offending their fellow classmates, so communicative activities may not run smoothly. Apart from that, the level of Chinese students' reading and writing abilities are much higher than their listening and speaking abilities. Students tend to feel frustrated and discouraged in communicative activities. Some students, who believe that they won't have many opportunities to use English as a communicative tool in their future career, are more concerned with their reading and translation skills. They may doubt whether the English classes that are dominated by communicative activities will help them to fulfill their goal.

Thirdly, the CLT method has high requirements for the ESL (English as a second language) teachers. It demands that teachers should not only have native like

competence in speaking, but also have a better knowledge of the culture and society of English speaking countries, which are currently rather challenging to most Chinese English teachers. The CLT teachers should have a good knowledge of sociocultural problems in the language so that they can focus on students' sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. As non-native English speakers, Chinese English teachers usually lack sufficient language proficiency. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the CLT method is easy to carry out in small-sized class, while most classes at Chinese universities are large-sized with an average of more than 60 students each. A large class is not favorable to carry out the CLT method because in a large class, students are normally at different levels which influences the efficiency of group work or pair work. When faced with such a situation, teachers are required to pay attention to accommodate all levels of learners. However, it is quite challenging for English teachers to focus on each student in classes, since students in every class have different levels of language proficiency, language learning habits and levels of confidence, etc..

## 7. SOLUTIONS AND MEASURES ON OVERCOMING THE CONSTRAINTS

In spite of these existing constraints of applying the CLT method in Chinese English classrooms, teachers can still attempt to overcome these limitations and adopt it in light of actual situations in China. It is true to say that most English classrooms are still practicing the traditional method that focuses on grammatical structures, and the change to communicative teaching cannot be achieved immediately. Therefore, the combination of CLT and other English language methodologies seems the most sufficient and effective way to develop Chinese language learners' communicative competence. When it comes to all the various teaching methodologies, it is worth to mention that the latest is not always the best. Take the CLT method as an instance. It has its disadvantages as well compared with traditional teaching methods.

Even though the traditional teaching methods are criticized and considered as out of date, it does not mean to say that they should be abandoned completely. The grammar translation method and the audio-lingual method are still useful and beneficial to language learners today. For example, most Chinese learners are inclined to be more interested in language structures and linguistic details when they start learning a language. Harvey (1985) asserted: "We would like to know what happens, because if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively". Therefore, grammar is an indispensable dimension of language, which is the reason why it is incredibly important to teach grammatical structures and forms to students, especially at the beginning stage of

language learning. Furthermore, the traditional teaching method such as the audio-lingual method is really helpful for students' pronunciation, and students can have a better knowledge of sentence structures by vocabulary items and pattern drills. Thus it can be seen that the traditional teaching methods' intent is to develop students' linguistic competence. Since communicative teaching emphasizes communicative competence, it can be effective to integrate these two types of methods together, making the best use of these useful aspects to facilitate students' language learning. When designing the curriculum, teachers can strike a balance between the content of grammar lecturing and communicative activities. The grammatical knowledge can be emphasized at the beginning stage of learning. Meanwhile, some task-based communicative activities can be designed by teachers so as to make classrooms more active and vivid. When students have achieved a higher proficiency of language, the communicative competence can be mainly centered on.

Under the integrated use of traditional teaching methods and the CLT method, students can't only gain a solid linguistic competence foundation, but they also can promote their communicative competence at the same time, which helps students learn English more systematically and effectively.

## CONCLUSION

Like all the other language teaching methods, the appearance of CLT method is closely related to the changes of society development and the aims of learning a language at that time. Each teaching method is a product of a certain historical circumstance, having its peculiar characteristics, advantages and limitations. The CLT methodology, as a relatively recent one, influences the language teaching significantly.

Nowadays, the CLT methodology is becoming one of the popular teaching methods in China and is supported by many English teachers and educators. Its principles and techniques motivate language learners to join in language learning actively and confidently. It not only cultivates students' communicative skills, but also gives them the opportunity to know more about the culture and pragmatic knowledge. With this in regard, the communicative teaching method is indeed an effective method to complement the traditional methodologies. Nevertheless, there are still many questions and problems with the CLT method which cannot be ignored. For instance, is the CLT method beneficial to beginners or low-level language learners to build up a solid language foundation so they are able to carry out the task-based activities and achieve a communicative purpose in the end? Besides, how to use the CLT method to teach learners complex content such as complicated grammatical rules, etc.? When the teachers

try to adopt the CLT method, all the related issues need to be taken into consideration. In spite of the limitations and defects of the CLT method, second language teachers still can adopt it in a flexible way, balancing CLT with other teaching approaches.

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