

THE APPLICATION OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN THE CHINESE
COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

Approved by Regina Pauly Date 17 May 2011

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COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By

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2011

Abstract

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China's economy is developing fast, and international exchanges are increasing. This has brought a large demand for people who can use English for real communication. The existing English language teaching in China, especially college English language teaching cannot meet this need. Since its first appearance, the communicative approach has been successfully applied to English language teaching in many countries and won great achievements. There are still a lot of problems facing teachers of English in China. The application of the communicative approach is ineffective, because the traditional teaching practice and the cultural resistance of this method enhance the difficulty of a smooth application of the communicative approach.

The theoretical basis of communicative approach and features of communicative approach will be explored to have a full understanding of the communicative approach. Based on the existing problems in China's college English Teaching, some suggestions have been given after the investigation of the problems for the correct application of communicative approach and the full development of the college students' communicative competence in China.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language in China is becoming more popular. The need for communicative competence in English due to the rapid development in the country is more urgent. Many educational reforms have been undertaken; new and frontier language learning theories have been introduced and investigated in China. However, there are still many different problems in the previous several English teaching approaches. After Chomsky (1965)'s "linguistic competence", American sociolinguist Hymes (1972) puts forward the concept of "communicative competence". Based on the theory of "communicative competence", "A communicative approach" has become a useful approach to cover a variety of developments for language learners, i.e., obtain the recognition and promotion in language teaching, and open up a wide perspective on language learning. With the introduction of the communicative language teaching into China and the need for the social development, the educational demand for educating and training college students' English quality and communicative competence has been raised in the recent years. However, due to insufficient understanding of the communicative teaching approach, and the limitations of conditions in language teaching as well as the traditional teacher-student relationship and other factors in China, the communicative approach has not achieved the desired results in the Chinese college English teaching.

Therefore, the focus of literature for the proposal paper will be on the basic theory of communicative approach, i.e. communicative competence and the application of communicative language teaching in the Chinese college English teaching. This review begins with some problems in English teaching in China, and

then addresses the theoretical study of communicative language teaching, including Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1972)'s model, Halliday (1985) and other scholars' study. Next, the focus is on the study of the application of the communicative language teaching in the Chinese College English teaching.

Advocates of the communicative approach point out that the approach is based on teaching the learners how to manipulate the structure of the foreign language and also develop the strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in the real situation and real time.

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, "How is the communicative approach applied properly in the Chinese College English teaching?"

Definition of Terms

Communicative Approach. The communicative approach is a teaching method to not only develop learners' linguistic competence, but also to develop their communicative competence. This approach is not a single and fixed teaching mode and its core is using language to learn, and learning to use language, rather than simply learning language. The aim of teaching is to eventually promote learners to obtain communicative competence (Shu & Zhuang, 1997).

Communicative Competence. Communicative competence includes how language is structured and also how language is used, i.e. linguistic and pragmatic knowledge (Hymes, 1972). It consists of four component competence: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet concerning EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, Google/Google Scholar and academic journals and books as the primary sources. Key search topics include “communicative language teaching” and “communicative approach in China”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of the theory of communicative approach will be conducted. A following review of literature relating to the application of the communicative approach in the Chinese College English teaching will also be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Basis of Communicative Approach (CA)

The origins of communicative approach (communicative language teaching) are to be found in the changes in the British teaching tradition dating from the late 1960s. As Li (2007) studied, until 1960, situational language teaching represented the major British approach to teaching a foreign language. He also stated that in situational language teaching, language was taught by practicing basic structure in meaningful situation-based activities, but just as the linguistic theory underlying audio-lingualism was rejected in the United States in the mid-1960s, British applied linguists began to call into question the theoretical assumptions underlying situational language teaching.

While challenging the traditional linguistic theory, in the late 1950s, Chomsky (1957) proposed the concept of “linguistic competence”. In his view, linguistic competence is a set of principle and knowledge system which is far more abstract than language itself. Hence, "linguistic competence" is not the competence of the actual use of language, or even the competence to organize and understand sentences. It is clear that Chomsky (1965) is interested in grammatical competence which is more abstract than language, rather than the actual use of language (pragmatic competence). That is to say, once the linguistic competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself. However, there are also a lot of opponents who have put forward different views.

Based on “linguistic competence”, the American sociolinguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes (1971) put forward “communicative competence”, stressing social and

cultural characteristics of language and asserting that language also has the characteristic of appropriateness. According to Hymes, Chomsky's "linguistic competence" is not involved in the use of language and the appropriate use of language in particular language situations. In fact, speakers and hearers also have the communicative relationship. Hymes (1972) holds that the linguistic competence of native language and the use of language are far beyond Chomsky's "linguistic competence". In his view, "linguistic competence" is only an integral part of "communicative competence"; a person has communicative competence, that is to say, he not only obtains the knowledge of language rules, but also has the appropriate use of language in social situations. Hymes also believes that the theory of communicative competence should include four aspects: degree of possibility, that is, a language system may include something such as phonetics, syntax, lexis, and pragmatics, etc., feasibility, appropriateness, and performance. Hymes regards the interaction between the four parameters as important factors of the theory of communicative competence, that is, if a person obtains communicative competence, he should know how to communicate in special situations. Many linguists approved Hymes's "communicative competence".

Subsequently, Canale and Swain (1980) further expanded "communicative competence". According to Canale and Swain, there are four dimensions of "communicative competence": grammatical competence—linguistic competence according to Chomsky, sociolinguistic competence—to understand the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose of their interaction, discourse competence—the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of

their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text, and strategic competence—the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication. Many foreign language teaching schools accept this theory.

Meanwhile, for the establishment of communicative approach, Halliday (1985)'s functional linguistics plays an important role. He believes that language is the system for expressing the meaning, not for creating the structure; transformational-generative grammar is too narrow and not widely used in language teaching practice. From the perspective of linguistics and pragmatics, he proposes that language has three functions: cognitive function, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and the function of coherent sequence; the former study of linguistics was limited in the cognitive function, ignoring the latter two functions, that is, under the guidance of this thought, language teaching theories focus only on the form of language training and the cognitive function. The result is that students cannot use language or grasp the communicative competence.

In the above analysis, although Hymes (1971) and Halliday (1985) take two different ways of dealing with Chomsky (1965)'s competence- performance distinction, both of their studies have affected the concept of the nature of language by adding to it the dimension of social appropriateness or social context. As Wang (2007) asserts, Halliday's theory emphasizes the semantic and communicative dimension rather than merely the grammatical characteristics of language, and leads to a specification and organization of language teaching content by categories of meaning and function rather than by elements of structures and grammar; Halliday has elaborated a powerful theory of the functions of language, which complements

Hymes' view of communicative competence.

Therefore, communicative competence is a highly complex ability. Just as Sui (2005) holds, communicative competence implies the competence to act as a speaker and listener in the diverse ways including grammatical accuracy, intelligibility and acceptability, contextual appropriateness and fluency. Hence, Sui states that “the theory of communicative competence is a broad theory involving the study of socio-linguistics, philosophy, and linguistics. Its main focus is the intuitive grasp of social and cultural rules and meaning that are carried by any utterance” (p.17). Ever since it was put forward, the theory of communicative competence has been throwing a lot of light onto a language teaching. The applied linguistic of the time began to call into question the traditional teaching method, and many foreign language teaching schools combined Hymes and Halliday's theory of communicative competence, and gradually established communicative approach based on the theory of communicative competence (Sui, 2005).

Features of Communicative Approach

Firstly, as mentioned, communicative approach (CA), which is also called communicative language teaching (CLT), is a teaching method in language teaching which develops not only learners' linguistic competence but also their communicative competence. As Shu and Zhang (1997) asserts, the core content of CA, which is not a single and fixed teaching mode, is using language to learn and learning to use the language rather than simply learning language and learning about language. The ultimate goal of CA is to enable learners to obtain sufficient communicative competence. Therefore, in most cases, students in the classrooms are in the scene of exchange and communication. CA emphasizes semantic and pragmatic dimension, not

just the form of language, and differs from traditional grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods which pursue linguistic competence.

Secondly, the role of students and teachers has changed. In the CA, students play a "leading role" in a more proactive position and differ from the traditional role as "supporters" in the traditional grammar-translation and audio-lingual teaching methods. According to Li (2007), in the application of CA, the teacher's role is neither teaching language knowledge, nor commanding students' sentence training, but organizing communicative activities in a variety of ways for developing students' communicative competence, and teachers are "managers", "helpers", "consulters", and "organizers of activities". Students are the protagonists, active participants in classroom activities, and no longer passive recipients.

Thirdly, CA emphasizes the authenticity of teaching materials. Furthermore, real-life and authentic language materials should be put in the social reasonable communicative situations. In Gao (2007)'s opinion, CA is against mechanical drills out of context; however, this does not mean completely ignoring the teaching of systematic grammar, but re-integrates the syntax by function so that the form of syntax follows function. Meanwhile, teachers can choose a very wide range of authentic language materials, including news, reports, advertisements, notices, forms, telephone conversations and other common materials, so that students have larger intake of language information, sufficient perceptual understanding, and broad knowledge.

In short, communicative approach develops not only learners' linguistic competence but also their communicative competence. It is different from the traditional teaching methods. In the CA, students play a leading role. Teachers as

“managers”, “helpers”, and “organizers of activities” employ authentic language materials to cultivate students’ English communicative competence in the specific situations.

The Development of CA in China and the Existing Problems of CA Application in the College English Teaching

The development of CA in China.

Since the introduction of CA into China in the late 1970s, after more than 20 years of experts and scholars’ research and practice, the basic theories and ideas of CA have had an impact on China's English teaching ideas, teaching methods and also generated a far-reaching influence on China's traditional perspectives of English education. Communicative competence-oriented CLT has become accepted by the majority of scholars in English teaching. Li (1990), who researched and promoted CA earlier, and has successfully made important achievements, for the first time has a comprehensive discussion of the relationship and integration between the communicative approach and traditional teaching methods in China. In the 1990s, many China's scholars in foreign language teaching explored how to implement CA in specific courses such as grammar, literature, reading, speaking, writing, etc., which enriched the study of CA (Gao, 2007).

The existing problems of CA application in the college English teaching.

In short, in recent years, the application of CA in the college English teaching has brought a new look to English language teaching (ELT) in China and made great achievements, but the application of theory to practice is not always easy. It sounds perfect in theory, but actually in practice many problems come up especially when applied in a culturally different country. The problems should not be neglected.

Because of the influence of many factors, the application of CA has not achieved the expected success in the college English teaching in China. Some problems are as follows:

Firstly, CA cannot completely obtain its own space in the college English teaching. The English examination system in many colleges and universities limits the realization of the objectives of CA. In the English examination system, the band-4 and band-6 of College English Test (CET4 and CET6) are the main methods for examining students' English level. But this kind of examination only tests students' vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading. After the examination, students cannot still use English to communicate in the specific context. Moreover, in order to help the college students pass the CET4 and CET6, many college English teachers put the teaching focus on English vocabulary, grammar, and reading. Hence, CA cannot be applied properly in the college English teaching.

Secondly, in the foreign language teachers' teaching methods, because of the long-term influence of the test-oriented traditional teaching models such as grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods, the college English teaching is still teacher-centered. Students normally receive the spoon-fed teaching model. Teachers explain words and sentences, carefully analyze grammatical structure, translate sentences, and then do all sorts of relevant exercises; students do not participate in any activities in the classroom and passively listen and accept the teachers' knowledge of language, ignoring the interpersonal function of language and also diverging from the law of foreign language learning of "input–internalization–output". The traditional teaching method does not attach importance to students' comprehensive competence of English learning. Basically, students' language level still remains in the aspect of

grammar-translation; communicative competence is not improved. On the other hand, the feature of CA shows that the teacher's role is multiple: an accurate analysis of the needs and interests of students, effective organization of classroom communicative activities, creating a rich and varied language environment. Hence, the feature of CA shows that the teachers' teaching level in CA is higher. However, many teachers' academic level based on language knowledge teaching cannot meet a requirement of CA in developing students' communicative competence.

Thirdly, as mentioned, traditional teaching methods that emphasize grammar make many students not accustomed to the different teaching method of CA. Zhou (2007) also studies that before the students in China enter universities, most students received the traditional grammar-translation methods in their middle schools, and they are accustomed to sitting in the classrooms and passively accepting English language points their English teachers inculcate. They record all the English knowledge their English teachers teach in the notebooks, but oral communicative competence is very poor. If teachers adopt CA, students feel very unsuited. When they find nothing recorded in the notebook, they will not understand the significance of CA. They think that the classroom activities are fun, and they do not realize the real purpose of CA.

In addition, a large classroom, the teachers' lack of communicative competence, the deficiency of teaching conditions, including teaching environment, teaching facilities, college English course books, etc. are also important factors for invalid implementation of CA in China's college English teaching.

The Suggestions for the Existing Problems of CA Application in the College ELT in China

Despite numerous difficulties, good news is that research and application of

communicative approach in China has made great development, has become more mainstream and popular teaching methods highly appreciated by foreign language teachers and scholars. In the light of communicative theory and personal practice, some suggested proposals are raised to relieve the dilemma of the college English teaching in China.

Firstly, as the famous English teaching scholar in China Liu (2004) states, the teachers' role in CA mainly has the following: the organizers of resources, guiders and helpers of classroom activities, researchers, learners, participants, consultants, and classroom organization's managers (group process manager), and all of these are different from the original teacher-centered role in the classroom. Students are centers of learning in CA. Therefore, teachers should change the perspective and their own role in the classroom as soon as possible to meet the requirements of communicative teaching. China's linguists, Fan (2002) holds that the intermediary role of teachers is to help students learn to think independently, solve problems, and independently control their own learning and so on, which is also the focus of education reform in different countries, and this makes teachers' task even more onerous. He also studies that teachers are no longer the traditional lecturers, and classroom activities are employed to stimulate students' innovation and organizational and learning competence. Therefore, in order to develop students' communicative competence, teachers should organize as many classroom activities as possible such as role-playing, dialogue, free discussion, reviewing, debate, oral composition, writing-related comment and encourage students to participate actively. Wang (2007) also holds that the teacher's mission is to provide students with the realistic language scenarios and allow students to have access to a wide range of language forms in the scenario

dialogues. Teachers will design and carefully arrange every activity, control the classroom discipline, and constantly improve their own professional standards. Group work is the main form of communicative language teaching. In the classroom teachers speak less, often arrange tasks to require students to conduct group discussions, and then provide guidance around to develop the main role of the students.

Secondly, the selection of teaching materials should be considered. Brown (1994), Tom Linson (1998) and Widdowson (1998) and other linguists believe that language teaching should provide language learners with the abundant practical and real-life language and opportunities of the use of the target language. In the classroom, teachers use the real-world language rather than the adapted or simplified language. Gao (2007) studies that communication is a big concept, which includes verbal communication and nonverbal communication; discourse is the basic unit of communicative teaching and is also an important form of communicative language and the supporter of CA. Hence, whether a sentence or language, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, they have to be synthetically applied to the discourse that expresses a whole scenario to learn. The lively discourse scenario for verbal communication activities will help students understand and develop their expression competence. Therefore, teachers should use authentic language teaching materials and promote the learning of English in specific situations so that students in real scenarios really come to understand the language communicative competence.

Thirdly, communicative approach requires using a variety of teaching methods to organize teaching to make the teaching process communicative. As Wang (2007) sums up, communicative approach contains a number of language teaching methods such as total physical response, elements of the audio-lingual method, flash cards,

drills, jazz chants, music, games, role play, information gap, and story-telling. These activities can create a rich language environment to cultivate students' language communicative competence. Meanwhile, these activities raise the overall communicative competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, teachers in the activities should establish the appropriate evaluation mechanism and warmly encourage students so that students can receive ample opportunities for language practice to enhance their learning confidence.

Fourthly, teachers should adhere to developing students' creative thinking and pay attention to stimulate college students' interest in learning. For example, teachers should encourage students to read English books, newspapers, and magazines, listen to English programs, and participate in activities such as English Corner after class to cultivate a sense of English language and add additional English language learning opportunities; regularly teachers ask students to write drama and hold speech contests; movies, TV shows and other audio-visual materials that students are interested in are used in the teaching process; innovative, flexible teaching forms and rich educational contents can be often employed; teachers also can re-organize students to discuss the fragments of movies, as well as feedback, to enhance the students' level of spoken English and understanding of language and culture for meeting English communicative purpose.

Fifthly, we should pay attention to the communicative language testing. As the former mentioned, the traditional language testing emphasizes the use of subjective and objective questions for the purpose of syntax. Students in the classroom spend a lot of time on tests, vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing. Teachers emphasize the development of students' communicative competence and should pay attention to

language communication in the test. For example, teachers regularly have evaluation on individual lectures, dialogue practice, drama, performance as the final elements for appraisal, which will guide teaching, and further encourage students to use communication means to have effective learning.

Sixthly, we should strengthen the teachers' own operational competence of communicative teaching. At present, many college English teachers' knowledge is not sufficient, and some teachers' communicative competence cannot undertake the full implementation of communicative approach in English Language teaching. As Shi and Qi (2005) asserts, the requirements for teachers' teaching level in CA are higher, and the tasks are more arduous, which requires that English teachers should have not only sufficient cultural communication awareness, but also deeper understanding of the ethnic culture and English culture, which can help students organize cross-cultural language learning and avoid cultural conflicts caused by errors as much as possible in learning. In short, according to the professor Zhang and Yan (2004), in the implementation of CA in college English teaching, teachers must be familiar with the latest educational theory, have a clear understanding of the particularity and importance of English language teaching, not only have a solid language foundation and skillful teaching proficiency, but also have a good psychological and pedagogical knowledge, and use their personal charm and characters to affect students so that CA has a comprehensive and successful implementation to promote college students' English learning and eventually enable them to become inter-disciplinary talents for meeting needs of the social development.

To sum up, the CA application in the college ELT in China is feasible and necessary. Changing the teachers' teaching perspectives and methods, reforming the

college examination system, and improving the teachers' professional competence are all urgent for the proper application of CA.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The theory of communicative competence has important teaching significance. Based on the theory of communicative competence, CA has a tremendous impact on current English language teaching. It is different from traditional teaching methods. With China's rapid economic development and international exchanges gradually increasing, a large demand for people who can use English for real communication is urgent and pressing. However, China's college English teaching cannot meet this requirement. Because of the influence of the traditional teaching methods and objective examination system and other factors, CA has brought many changes to China in teaching and also there are many unsatisfactory results and problems in the application. From the analysis and discussion in the previous section, we can find that there are still many tasks that need to be done in the accurate application of CA in the college English teaching in China. As for the issue of the application of CA in China, college English teachers should fully understand the theory of the communicative competence, transform the role of teachers and students, change the traditional teacher-centered, spoon-feeding teaching mode, adopt a variety of teaching methods to organize the classroom, set up specific situations so that students can learn English in a real scenario to truly learn the language communicative competence, and adhere to internal and external courses to develop students creative thinking ability for creating a communicative learning environment.

Communicative theory is based on student learning, communication and development, and it helps the overall quality of students, training students in the ability of cross-cultural communication. For a number of deficiencies, the paper

makes some recommendations: reforming the English test system, optimizing classroom teaching, training in real-life communication skills, strengthening teachers' training of communicative competence, organizing teaching scholars to explore the appropriate communicative teaching methods in the context of China, improving the overall quality of teachers, correctly handling the relationship between reading and writing skills, having a correct attitude towards the teaching of grammar, and combination of traditional teaching methods and the communicative language teaching method.

In short, the field of English teaching circulates such a statement: Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn (Richards & Rogers, 2001). In the trend of economic globalization, the CA that improves the overall quality of the students plays a prominent role in the language teaching, and is bound to draw more attention from teachers. However, any teaching method is not perfect, and the specific implementation will be affected by the specific conditions and contexts. Therefore, our university teachers should continue to enrich their own practices, and improve the students' communicative competence.

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