

Benefiting from Both the Communicative Approach and the Traditional Teaching Methods in ELT

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Keywords: ELT, Traditional methods, Communicative approach

Abstract: For sometime, English Language teaching (ELT) in China has been undergoing a heated discussion as to the best way of teaching. Some think that the communicative approach is inappropriate while others think that the traditional methods are too old-fashioned. This is the case for English Language teaching in China. This paper intends to show that both the communicative approach and the traditional methods can coexist and influence each other in the present Chinese teaching context.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of ELT (English Language Teaching) in non-English-speaking countries, English teachers have become more aware that the exclusive use of either the communicative approach or grammar-translation method does not suit all English teaching situations. Teachers have also discovered that no single teaching method deals with everything that concerns the form, the use, and the content of the target language. Brown (1994: 74) also thinks that "the complexity of language learners in multiple world-wide contexts demands an eclectic blend of tasks each tailored for a particular group of learners in a particular place, studying for particular purposes in a given amount of time." Therefore, the paper will argue that the traditional methods and the communicative approach can co-exist with each other in an ELT context in China because different approaches have their respective advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, what ELT teachers in China need to do now is to modernize, not Westernize, English teaching. They need to combine the new with the old so as to adapt the communicative approach to traditional teaching structures.

2. The Goal of Learning a Foreign Language

According to linguistics, language is an abstract system used for human communication. We use language to communicate, to exchange between people knowledge, ideas, opinions, information and feeling. It is inconceivable that we could have established so complex a social interaction if we had not had the language at our disposal.

The description of language makes language teacher consider language not only in term of its structure, but also in term of its communicative functions. Therefore, the ultimate goal of language teaching is to train our students to acquire the ability to communicate. The communicative ability includes grammatical competence (knowledge of the rules of grammar), social linguistics

competence (knowledge of the rules of use and rules of discourse), discourse of competence (cohesion and coherence), strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and non-communication strategies). These four kinds of competences are inseparable, grammatical competence is the base. A solid grasp of grammatical knowledge helps to improve other abilities. Without the ability of the other, it is difficult to get the meaning across. Hence, language learning should not only include the knowledge of language, but also the ability to use that language.

These methods can benefit each other because each has its advantages and disadvantages. Anyhow, methodology is not something fixed, a set of rigid principles and procedures that the teacher must conform to. Rather it is a dynamic, creative and exploratory process that begins anew each time the teacher encounters a group of learners. What we should do now is to analyze our own situation in order to develop a rational and optional teaching methodology so as to meet the needs of our teaching context. In classroom teaching, we should not only pay attention to grammar but also to the students' communicative competence. In order to arouse the students' interest in learning, we should give students more opportunities to practice, help them to cultivate the habit of learning in an active way.

3. A Description of the Communicative Approach

Communicative language teaching can be defined as an approach which regards communicative competence as the aim of language learning in teaching English as a foreign or second language (Littlewood, 1981:2-15). Communicative competence was coined by Hymes in 1974. The ability to use the grammatical system of a language to compose sentences correctly, and to use correct sentences in appropriate situations and to different people is what we call "Communicative competence".

The communicative approach school has four aspects. Firstly, communicative approach school holds that language is the tool of communication. It serves for everyone in society. Because of different occupations, people have different demands on the language. It naturally affects the contents of language teaching the drilling forms, teaching methods and the proving effect of language teaching. It is impossible and unnecessary to master all the vocabulary while learning a foreign language. The ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing can hardly be like a native speaker's command of the language. And we need not do that Communicative language teaching put forward the principle of teaching for aims. That is the appropriate content of teaching, the appropriate method and the appropriate training should be chosen according to the students' concentered target and the realistic needs. The language teaching will teach what the students will use in their future job, in order to avoid diverting their attention and wasting time. (Littlewood, 1981:2-15)

Secondly, the communicative approach school holds that the traditional language teaching took the forms seriously but neglected the contents. They are in favor of changing it thoroughly. They believe in fostering the students' ability of applying foreign language through the language function and contents. Language is the tool of exchanging feelings. What foreign language teaching should give the students is what to say and how to say it. What to say is the content or all kinds of ideas which people convey in communication. How to say is the express method or the every day expressions used to convey ideas. Communicative approach opposes the use of grammar as the key link in the arrangement and teaching of foreign languages (Jeremy, H, 1983:8-12).

Thirdly, the communicative approach school pays great attention to fostering students' language ability and to the aspect of communication in a foreign language, which they believe can be fostered only by being in contact with the language and practicing the language. They emphasized the importance of truth. The training content and form are both practical from the communicative angle.

They pay attention to narration in a foreign language, and working in a foreign language.

Finally, communicative approach school believes that learning language depends on practicing repeatedly. There is a developing course from imperfect to perfect, from unable to use the language to being able to, even the native speaker may use improper terms sometimes, so teaching a foreign language should engage students to use foreign language as often as they possibly can. Mistakes are hard to avoid when the students speak. They can correct themselves through repeated practice. Don't correct each mistake now and then or they will be too worried to open their mouths.

4. Some Advantages of Using the Communicative Approach

The communicative approach aims to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world. We may choose to live in the ivory tower of academia, but we owe it to our students to give them the chance to choose where they go. The communicative approach is not the be all and end all of language teaching, but it is certainly something that every language teacher should be well informed about and which should be included in every foreign language curriculum.

Whilst for the student of E. S. L. (English as a Second Language), the communicative approach is desirable, for the student of E. F. L (English as a Foreign Language) it is essential.

The student of ESL lives in a place where English is used all the time and so is forced to learn how

to communicate. Necessity is the mother of invention. However the student of ESL uses English only in the classroom; unless the art of communication is taught, then the student will not learn how to communicate. "It will also be generally agreed, perhaps, that traditionally the focus of attention has been on the linguistic skills and that it has commonly been supposed that once these are acquired in reasonable measure the communicative abilities will follow as a more or less automatic consequence. What evidence we have, however, suggests that this is not the case: the acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities in a language" (H. G. Widdowson, 1978:67).

CLT is highly praised when it appeared because it has some advantages: firstly, it stresses the importance of using the language rather than learning the rules of usage; secondly, devices can help learners to motivate them to work with language varying according to their age interest, etc; thirdly, it increases students' communicative competence in a given social context. English is a tool and communicative English language teaching aims at fostering students' ability to communicate in English. The ability is fostered throughout the course of using it. Whether the ability has been fostered or not should be proved by using it. Communicating in English is the central issue of English teaching; it should be concentrated on by the teachers of English. (Dickinson, L, 1987:9-25)

5. Chinese Specific Conditions or Features Limit the Use of It

The past 100 years witnesses the history of China's ELT as being full of twists and turns, ups and downs, progressions and regressions. During the development it has undergone dramatic changes: English was twice ousted from school and twice reintroduced; And China's ELT has suffered a lot from the sway of politics and foreign trends. This is the basic background of China's ELT.

5.1 Linguistic and Psychological Factors

Chinese differs from English in many aspects. Taking vocabulary, for example, Chinese is a pictographic language while English is an alphabetic writing language. Chinese is mainly analytic as well as synthetic. As for psychology (for example, motivation), Chinese students have strong curiosity about the West. The problem is how to stir up their strong interest in the study of English.

It is proved that different language varieties are not only identified but they are associated with deep-rooted emotional responses in which thought feelings, stereotypes and prejudices about people, social, ethnic and religious groupings, and political entities are strongly associated with different languages or varieties of a language.

5.2 The Limitation of Materialistic Conditions

Today we are still faced with a terrible shortage of qualified English teachers and teaching equipments. According to the national findings report in 1986, only 27.6% of the English teaching force in middle schools are qualified. As a result, a single method can't shoulder the heavy task of EIT in China. And a class of more than 50 students makes it impossible for an English teacher to use the communicative approach successfully and effectively.

5.3 High Requirement of Idea-Logical Education

The combination of foreign language learning and teaching with ideo-logical education is one of the important features in China's methodological system. In 1987, the Royal Inspectoriate of Britain put forward two goals for FLT: a) for the purpose of learning language and literature; b) for the purpose of helping students to know other cultures, customs, society and social behavior. Yet China sets very high requirements on FL learning and teaching in middle schools. It lays particular stress on educating its youth with socialist morality and lofty ideals of socialism. In fact many standardized requirements, criteria and regulations do not reflect the diverse needs of the country. They would sap both competitive and vitality in the ELT in China. They would also dampen the enthusiasm of individuals.

5.4 Putting Reading in the First Place

This is also one of the features of ELT in China. People hold it because they think reading and listening are two main channels for taking in knowledge. Comparatively, reading is more important. So far as the international-communication is concerned, the number of interpreters needed in China is very small. As an open society, people have more exposure to FL. Therefore China doesn't have to lay much stress on Listening and speaking. Emphasis must be placed on reading, which, in return, will promote listening and speaking.

Now many English teachers in China have come to realize the importance of Communicative approach and are trying to use it in their teaching. However, many English teachers are not native speakers and we can find it surprisingly hard to put into practice and results are often not effective for following disadvantages:

- 1). Certain differences exist between real life and the classroom environment. Students are shocked when they meet real life situation.
- 2). Students are active interacting with each other. Thus the teacher's role is less dominant than in traditional methods. The difficulties of controlling such activities may make teachers feel threatened and they may fear losing control.
- 3). It is difficult to assess the results of communicative language teaching.
- 4). Teachers find it difficult to tolerate errors.
- 5). It is often abstract and dull thus students may feel bored especially for beginners who can not express themselves clearly with limited vocabulary.
- 6). Teachers have difficulties in making to varied and interesting plans each week.
- 7). Many students learn English just to pass the exams which emphasize vocabulary, grammar and translation. They pay little attention to listening, speaking and writing. So it may not be very

effective.

6. Traditional English Teaching Methods in China

Traditional ELT in China is dominated by a teacher-centered, examination-oriented, grammar and vocabulary-based method. Knowledge of English is transmitted through the teacher who acts as “an authority, a knowledge giver and moral example.” (Cortazzi&Jin, 1996:61-80) The students are passive receivers of knowledge and they mainly learn through repetition and memorization. However, the traditional English teaching methods has also been proved to be useful and effective.

In teaching grammar, it is important to make the language situations and language material as realistic as possible. Immediately after supplying students with adequate explanations of grammar functions, the teacher can provide students with suitable situations that encourage students to ultimately use the rules in real-life communication. For instance, in teaching the modal auxiliaries can and may, what should be made clear is that the two modals are not synonym sand that there are contexts in which only one of them is appropriate. Thus, these two sentences have slightly different meanings.

- 1). It can be very nice to have a picnic in w inter.
- 2). It may be very nice to have a picnic in w inter.

There never was and probably never will be a best teaching method because we have different learners, different learning purpose and different teaching Chinese contexts. Language learning and teaching must always be viewed in a context setting or background. Researchers also think that the complexity of language learners in multiple world-wide contexts demands an eclectic blend of tasks each tailored for a particular group of learners in a particular place, studying for a particular in a given mount of time. Therefore, the communicative approach and the traditional Chinese methods can co-exist with each other and influence each other in an ELT context in China.

7. Combine the Traditional Methods with Communicative Approach

From my point of view, the application in the combination of traditional method and CLT in different stages should be differently focused according to the realistic situation of ELT in china. The basic language should be solid in the primary stage where the learning content is mainly pronunciation, intonation and some basic vocabulary and sentence patterns. Teaching in foreign language will bring students a lot of trouble and can't be understood while teaching in native language will be simply effective which is quite natural from a psychological point of view. On one hand we should pay attention to grammar translated method in order to make students understand and grasp the complex sentence patterns and ways of expression, by which students enhance their language knowledge and ability and have a new understanding to the discourse, on the other hand, we might adopt communicative approach when students grasp some language knowledge and speech ability to encourage students to make communicative activities by combining new-learned knowledge and make students take notice of communication as well as the language form, thus, increase the amount of language input, expand new-learned knowledge, improve the skillfulness and practice communicative ability.

In the teaching practice, the combination of traditional methods and communicative approach is mainly shown when we teach intensive reading for intensive reading is a synthetically course and it is still a main course in ELT nowadays, whose responsibility is both cultivating the speech ability and communicative ability for students.

During the process of teaching, the teacher should pay more attention to narrow the crucial gap between grammatical competence and communicative competence.

- 1). Teachers can use authentic language rather than artificial language.

Grammar is a set of rules which describe the structure of a language. Therefore, some teacher and students use grammar rules to guide them to construct sentences, some of which, to certain extent, are formally possible but not feasible in real communication. The made-up sentences may well serve to illustrate a practical point, but it may appear awkward in real communication. So it is advisable for teachers to use feasible and authentic language in their teaching. Besides, whether sentences are feasible or not is sometimes beyond one's knowledge of grammar. The mastery of the feasibility of a language cannot be achieved through the mere study of grammar. At the same time, one needs to carefully observe how language is actually used in real communication.

2). Encouraging communicative practice rather than mechanical activity.

According to communicative theory, a real communicative consists of: information gap, choice and feedback. Here is an example of the mechanical practice of the word "nose" in traditional English teaching:

The teacher points at his own nose and asks the students:

Teacher: What's this?

Students: It's a nose.

Teacher: Whose nose is it?

Students: It's your nose.

Teacher: Yes, do you have a nose?

Students: Yes, I have.

Teacher: Where is your nose?

Students: It's above my mouth.

Although all the sentences in the dialogue are grammatically correct, they are far from being communicative. Firstly, they have no content or communicative value, for in the real situation people seldom ask such silly questions as "I have a nose. Do you have a nose?" Secondly, the teacher already knows what answers to expect, and therefore there is no information gap, because no new information is produced.

3). Associating language structures with communicative functions.

Communicative function refers to what people do by means of language. We use language to get things done, for instance, to make invitation/suggestion/inquiry, to apologize and so on. The same functions can be expressed by different structures, while the same structures can fulfill different functions. In contrast, traditional teaching focuses attention on the description of language structures rather than on the communicative functions. This results in learners who know a lot about grammar structures but can't use the structure to communicate.

The association of language structures with communicative functions as well as social contexts can help to shift the focus of attention from the grammatical to communicative properties of language. It can also help the students to implement the grammatical competence in appropriate contextualized communicative language use.

4). Emphasizing the correctness as well as the appropriateness.

Traditional language teaching deals with the structure of language or variety, but fails to attach enough importance to the appropriateness of utterance to social context. As a result, students can produce grammatically correct sentences, but can't use them appropriately in social situations. To enable students to use the language appropriately, the teacher can engage them in stylistic exercises or communicative interaction activities.

No single method or approach is equal to the heavy task of ELT in China. Even Stern (1985:230) admits "...the complexity of the entire rule system is much that might appear almost impossible for anyone except a native speaker to acquire communicative competence." We should be cautious about the approaches and adopt the one which is suitable to our own situations instead of following one fashion after another. In my opinion, any kind of teaching approaches should be combined with

the actual contexts We can not throw away one kind of method and pick up another blindly. Otherwise we will get the result that throw out the baby with the bathwater. If we only stick to one method, we will be destined to failure. As a matter of fact, ELT in China is doing its best. More reforms are being carried out and more progress is being made. What we need is time and effort. If the progress we have made in the past is the indicator of what lies ahead, we believe that the next century will bring future growth in Chinese ELT.

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