

The Application of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Pedagogy in Chinese Primary English Classrooms

Lin Gan^{1,a}, Haifeng Li^{1,b}

¹*School of Humanities, Nanchang Vocational University, Nanchang City, China*

^a*ganlin0723@163.com, ^b534529672@qq.com*

Keywords: CLT, communicative competences, learning theories in SLA, grammatical accuracy, contextual appropriateness

Abstract: CLT, full name of Communicative Language Teaching, is a language teaching concept oriented to the actual communication needs of language learners. Its core idea is to emphasize the practical and communicative nature of language, rather than simply teaching grammar and vocabulary. This paper is anticipated to give guidance to Chinese educators on how to use CLT more effectively. The remaining parts of this paper are organized as follows. The second part examines relevant literature regarding CLT, which includes the background and features of CLT, application of CLT pedagogy to young learners, the strengths and issues with applying CLT in Chinese primary schools. The research context is addressed in the third part, introducing the education model in China, and briefly describing my own teaching experiences in China. The fourth part discusses the application of the CLT pedagogy in Chinese primary English classrooms, recognizes the challenges faced by its implications, and provides possible suggestions for its future implementation.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English is a vital instrument in international communications in the world. The goal of English instruction in Chinese elementary schools is to arouse learners' interest in learning English and encourage them to engage actively in simple English dialogues [6]. In the current teaching context, teachers should focus on grammar and students' language application skills. China embraced communicative strategies in the late 1970s and has been involved in CLT ever since, however, CLT practice in China does not produce the expected results, and learners still lack appropriate communication skills [11]. Taking this into consideration, this paper is designed to achieve the following goals: To understand how the CLT teaching method is implemented in Chinese primary English classrooms; To recognize difficulties experienced during the implementation of CLT and to give some advice for encouraging the use of CLT in Chinese primary schools.

2. Literature review

2.1 Background of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is derived from two interconnected sources. “One comes from outside the profession and reflects the changing status of English in the world. Another is internally initiated: it reflects the language teaching profession gradually evolving a changed understanding of its essential knowledge base and associated instructional practices through the efforts of applied linguists, specialists, and teachers in the field of second language teaching and teacher education.” [10]. This shows that English is becoming more and more important in our daily life as a social language and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a good illustration of how these two sources of change are reflected in a paradigm shift in language instruction.

2.2 Features of CLT

2.2.1 The definition of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a language teaching method that focuses on language learners' communication needs and competencies. There exist two versions of CLT: “strong” CLT and “weak” CLT. The weak version of CLT describes that learners first learn the grammar of the sentences and then practice those sentence patterns in real conversation. On the contrary, language is acquired through communication in the strong version of CLT. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a kind of “strong” CLT because task-based instruction is firstly taught in real conversation, and gradually the learners could acquire practical skills and grammatical knowledge through those conversations [10].

2.2.2 The roles of learners and teachers in CLT classrooms

In CLT classrooms, the roles of students and teachers are varied and are supposed to depend on the situation. The role of students is negotiator, interacting and negotiating in a study group. In terms of teachers, they are facilitators, monitors, researchers, and learners. However, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson [8] point out that students are all communicators, they are attempting to communicate even if their understanding of the target language is limited. For teachers, they are more like advisors and co-communicators, one of their duties is to improve communication. The teacher’s role could also be a passive observer in some communicative activities [9]. Other roles of teachers are needs analysts, counsellors and group process managers.

2.2.3 Types of learning and teaching activities of CLT

Littlewood et al. [9] argue that there are two kinds of activities in CLT. One is “Functional communication activities”, which require the teacher to create scenarios so that students could overcome an information gap or solve an issue. For example, finding differences in several pictures, sequencing pictures of events, solving problems based on clues, and so on. Another is “Social interaction activities”, which ask students to focus on social and functional meanings of language. In addition, it implies that the activities are more directly related to the types of communication scenarios faced outside of the classroom, such activities include: discussion, role-plays, simulations, and so on. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson [8] suggest the following teaching materials in CLT: authentic materials, scrambled sentences, language games, picture strip stories, and role-play activities. Moreover, activities such as jig-saw, task-completion, opinion-sharing, and information-transfer could all be brought into CLT classrooms [10].

2.3 Application of CLT pedagogy to young learners

It is generally accepted that starting English as a foreign language before the critical period-12 or 13 years old may produce a better learning effect. In addition, some parents want their children to learn English from an early age since learning English well could bring many benefits to their children's development in the future [3]. Cameron [1] writes that young learners have a great need to discover meaning and they are wired to connect emotionally as well as interact with others. This emotive and social drive accelerates children's language development, which is assisted by social contact and scaffolding. Classroom activities designed for young learners may be better based on a shared understanding of the nature of communication if communication implies developing intersubjectivity and sharing understanding with others. Therefore, it is considered that learning happens when learners utilize language through conversation in CLT.

2.4 The strengths of CLT

From the learner's perspective, the CLT method is a student-centred and situation-based language teaching methodology, which is conducive to mobilizing students' enthusiasm for learning. Another advantage of CLT is enabling learners to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of circumstances by using the language they have learned [10]. If learners could communicate fluently and effectively with others, they will be more encouraged to study this language, and a sense of security is enhanced through cooperative interaction with their peers and teachers [8]. For classroom practices, relationships between learners and teachers have substantially improved and are highly valued for the CLT method. As a result, students could express and discuss their ideas with one another in the classroom so as to ensure the principle position of students in learning.

2.5 The issues with applying CLT in Chinese primary schools

For teachers, Garton et al. [4] state that a large number of Chinese primary schools lack qualified teachers, especially in impoverished or rural areas. Moreover, another possible issue for teachers is that they have problems teaching in the target language due to their lack of confidence in listening and speaking skills [11]. For learners, they lack the motivation to learn English since most of them believe that there is no use in learning English. Moreover, Yang [12] claims that most children are exposed to English in class for one to three hours each week so they have little exposure to English outside of class. For classroom practices, Wei [11] explains that English classes are relatively large in China, leaving little room for free communicative activities. Secondly, some textbooks are deemed too challenging for pupils and teachers. Lastly, time limits, the choice of appropriate activities, the cost factor, and the hesitation of some students are all factors that limit the application of CLT in classrooms.

3. Context

CLT approach has also been adopted and applied in China for several decades. As it becomes more integrated into the global economy, China faces challenges from all sides. In response to the new challenges, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has started several reforms since 1994 intending to alter the pedagogy, from emphasizing grammar-translation to a more practical one [7]. According to China's education policy, English education in China is increasingly focused on learners' communication skills, which is in line with the teaching philosophy of CLT. This paper focuses on a private primary school from a second-tier city in China. Most of the learners in this school are primary school students from third grade to sixth grade, and they are aged between eight and eleven years old.

The current English teaching curriculum in China is designed to improve students' communication skills and inspire them to communicate in the target language.

4. Discussion

4.1 Advantages of Applying CLT to English classrooms for Chinese pupils

4.1.1 Developing Learners' Communication Skills in Their Daily Life

As revealed in the objective of CLT, the aim of learning a language is to have effective communication in everyday situations, so the most significant advantage of applying CLT is that it could develop learners' communication skills in their daily life. Take my own teaching experiences for example, learners are usually divided into several groups and are invited to perform in front of the class, this activity is beneficial to stimulating students learning motivation, which is consistent with the student-centred feature of CLT. Before they performed in class, I walked around the classroom and listened to the mistakes in the sentence patterns they practiced. At the end of the class, I would correct those mistakes and provide some useful suggestions. Now, the teacher acted as a monitor and assessor.

4.1.2 Providing Learners with a Real-world English Learning Environment

It is widely accepted that applying CLT in English classrooms could provide a real-world learning environment for learners. Littlewood et al. [9] explain that language skills and strategies for effective use in real-world circumstances are ought to be developed by learners. Also, real-world situations are frequently reflected in the materials and activities used in the classroom [2]. This is exemplified in my teaching design which includes some communicative activities simulating everyday life. For instance, when I was teaching the lesson "Shopping" in the first unit of grade four, students were divided into groups of two to simulate a shopping scenario, one playing the role of a salesperson and the other playing the role of a customer. In the process of simulating, students may acquire the common vocabulary of the relevant scenarios.

4.1.3 Increasing the learning interests of students in classrooms

Unlike the Grammar-translation approach, lectures are only heard by the students. On the contrary, when students engage in real-life stories and activities, this may help them develop interests beyond the classroom setting since they shift from being the audience to the protagonist. As mentioned above, learners are more confident and motivated to learn a language if they communicate fluently with others [8], which will create a virtuous cycle of language learning and learners will become more interested in learning.

4.2 Obstacles of applying CLT to English classrooms for Chinese students

4.2.1 Obstacles from Learners' Perspectives

(1) Poor Level of Competency

Chinese Primary school students have poor English language skills to the extent that it restricts the teachers to apply CLT to classrooms. Due to China's long history of exam-oriented education, Chinese students focus more on how to use exam techniques to achieve high scores in English exams instead of using English they have learned to communicate in real life, so Chinese learners are learning a kind of "deaf and dumb English". Consequently, it is quite difficult for teachers to find

activities that match students' abilities in CLT classrooms since learners do well in written exams but are poor in English speaking.

(2) Few opportunities to speak English

From what has been described above, students do not have many opportunities to speak English in daily life, especially in some poor areas. Children from underdeveloped areas have little contact with foreigners so they believe it is useless to learn English. One cause associated with this phenomenon is that students only learn English in class for one to three hours every week and a few minutes for oral practice a week [12], so students do not have other chances to speak English after class. Another consequence related to this phenomenon is that children's motivation to learn English is reduced correspondingly as there are particularly few opportunities to use English in everyday life.

4.2.2 Obstacles from Teachers' Perspectives

(1) Shortage of Qualified Teachers

As introduced above, a large number of Chinese primary schools are destitute of qualified teachers [4]. This can be seen from my working experience, I worked in a private primary school as an English teacher in a second-tier city in China, some of my colleagues are university graduates without any teaching experiences, and there are even some teachers who teach subjects that do not correspond to what they studied at university. For teachers who do not specialize in English, it is likely to result in teaching students the wrong knowledge, such as the pronunciation of words and some difficult grammar. Moreover, this may be a reason why teachers declined to adopt CLT in their classrooms in that they do not study English professionally at university.

(2) Lacking Confidence in English Competence

More importantly, CLT requires a relatively high level of listening and speaking skills for teachers. To be exact, it is indispensable for English teachers to have a kind of native-like competence in order to teach CLT effectively [12]. Nevertheless, it is hard for Chinese English teachers to answer some unplanned questions about the target language or culture that appears in the classroom owing to a lack of English competency [11]. Reviewing my own teaching experience, a student once asked me what the foreign restaurant was like in my class when I taught the lesson "What would you like?". I did not answer that question in that I had never been abroad, and I was not brought up with western culture. At that moment, I would feel a little bit of disappointment and a lack of confidence in myself. Therefore, it is of great significance for teachers to learn about foreign cultures and build self-confidence when applying CLT to classrooms.

4.2.3 Obstacles from Other Perspectives

(1) Large-size English classrooms

Apart from the teacher and student factors, Huang [7] describes that English classes are large in China. For one thing, it is not convenient for learners to have communicative activities because of the large-size English classrooms. For another, teachers may find it hard to manage the class and design appropriate activities for all students due to the wide range of students' English language skills. Consequently, teachers prefer to use traditional teaching methods such as grammar-teaching method (GTM) instead of CLT as some traditional teaching methods are teacher-centered and it is conducive for teachers to manage the class and control the pace of the class.

(2) Inconsistency between government initiatives and the examination system

Inconsistency between government initiatives and the examination system is also a key factor why CLT is not developing successfully in Chinese English classrooms. Secondary ELT's main goals were reported to include developing communicative competence in English, increasing learner autonomy, and developing a variety of intellectual skills [5]. As seen from the Chinese government initiatives,

English education in China is increasingly paying more attention to the communicative abilities of students. However, it is difficult for Chinese English teachers to shift from a focus on examinations to a focus on improving students' communicative competence on account of China's long history of examination-oriented education. Also, students' test scores are related to teachers' teaching performance such as teachers' salary and teachers' title. For this reason, the goal of Chinese English teachers is to improve the performance of students in the whole class.

(3) Lacking Teaching Materials and Resources

One of the hottest topics teachers talk about is that some contents in textbooks are too difficult for learners to learn from and for teachers to use in their teaching. For instance, although there are too many words in the word list of textbooks and too much information in each unit, it is the learners' responsibility to memorize each word in the word list and to master the grammar in each unit. Consequently, teachers spend a lot of time explaining the new words and the grammar clearly, leaving no other time for students to communicate. Apart from this, new textbooks are incompatible with the present testing system. The textbook has been updated so quickly but the examination system has remained unchanged, which is more challenging for teachers to prepare for the ever-changing courses and heavier burden for students to learn. From what has been analysed above, both two reasons can be used to explain why the development of CLT has been hindered in China.

4.3 Possible Solutions for Applying CLT to Primary English Classrooms

4.3.1 From the Teacher's Perspective

(1) Teachers Should Receive Pre-service and In-service training

One feasible solution to the concerns is that teachers should attend pre-service training and in-service training. With the reform of education, a new college degree for training primary school English teachers will be created, and programs for preparing future primary English teachers are being developed. Meanwhile, many existing teachers will need in-service training which includes learning new skills and approaches to work with younger pupils and learning how to apply CLT effectively in classrooms. Many training programs have existed in China, so it is very easy for teachers to get those training. This is evident in the case of teachers who have studied English education at university are required to prepare for the English teaching qualification exam and only those with this certificate are qualified to teach students in schools.

(2) Seeking Help from Technology

With the development of technology, teachers are encouraged to utilize current technology in CLT classrooms, producing more effective tools for learning and using the language. Furthermore, this technical assistance and multimedia packages could help to compensate for a lack of qualified teachers or their inadequate language ability [4]. Take one of my lessons for example, the theme of the lesson is "My classroom", I took many pictures of the classroom and put them in my teaching slides. Those pictures were shown on screen in my class and students could see themselves clearly on the screen and understand their environment. A realistic teaching situation is formed through the display of those pictures on the screen. In this way, I could enlarge the picture and teach some vocabulary about stationery such as pencil boxes and so on, thus improving the effect of English teaching. More importantly, teachers are supposed to set up the concept of lifelong learning as well as improve English teaching practices and English language skills. This solution may still be seen as simple but helpful for teachers.

4.3.2 From the learner's Perspective

(1) Increasing the cultural awareness of students in the target language

The teacher may make full use of the classroom to increase students' cultural understanding through everyday English study. For example, the teacher may explain the origins of Christmas to the students and allow them to enjoy the holiday on their own. By increasing the cultural awareness of students in the target language, students will gain a better understanding of the target culture, which will facilitate their communication in the target language in the classroom [11]. However, it is quite difficult for teachers to incorporate cultural awareness into classroom activities. This is mainly because China's long history of grammar-oriented English examinations drives teachers to spend too much time teaching students how to achieve high marks in exams.

(2) Improving learners' L1 cognitive resources and English competence

Although students in some poor areas have little contact with foreigners and lack a good language environment for English learning [4], they still have some L1 cognitive capability and English competence, those L1 capability may help learners learn a lot if they are triggered and used correctly. Moreover, the building background component and activities (BBCAs) are very useful [7]. The focus of building background components and activities (BBCA) was the provision of clear ideas connecting directly to learners' existing prior experiences and the new ones using various strategies; the KWL chart (What We Know/ What We Want to Learn/ What We Learned) is an interesting example of a BBCA. Students' existing information are elicited firstly through whole-class discussion before transforming classroom activities into group or pair work. Students might complement one another's knowledge and raise their L1 and L2 cognitive abilities. Finally, they become multi-competent speakers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the following three ideas are listed. Firstly, it is essential for English teachers to explore some useful ways of teaching CLT in accordance with Chinese educational guidelines. Secondly, it is necessary to improve the selection criteria for English teachers and recruit those who have been educated as English teachers during their university studies. Finally, the teaching materials and teaching methods need to be improved in Chinese primary English classrooms. teachers need to integrate communicative functions into language teaching and add western cultural elements to their teaching activity design. In addition, large class sizes made it hard to implement CLT in Chinese primary English classrooms and overburdened teachers have no time to design classroom activities to improve students' communicative ability in English. Reducing class sizes is difficult to achieve owing to a large population of Chinese people. In view of all the previously listed topics, I would propose more research on how to implement CLT effectively in the case of large class sizes in China in the future.

- 1) Jiangxi university humanities and social science planning project (number: YY161011);
- 2) Jiangxi teaching reform general project (number: JXJG-17-86-4);
- 3) China Foreign Language Teaching Materials and Teaching Methods Research Center, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press horizontal project (number: 2021JX0220)

References

- [1] Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge university press.
- [2] Celce-Murcia, M., & McIntosh, L. (1991). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. University of California, Los Angeles.
- [3] Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2014). *Challenges in teaching English to young learners: Global. perspectives and local realities*. *Tesol Quarterly*, 48(4), 738–762.
- [4] Garton, S., Copland, F., & Burns, A. (2011). *Investigating global practices in teaching English to young learners*. *ELT Research Papers*, 11(1), 1-24
- [5] Hu, G. (2005). *English language education in China: Policies, progress, and problems*. *Language Policy*, 4(1), 5-24

- [6] Hu, Y. (2007). *China's foreign language policy on primary English education: What's behind it?* *Language. Policy*, 6(3), 359–376.
- [7] Huang, S.-H. (2016). *Communicative Language Teaching: Practical Difficulties in the Rural EFL Classrooms in Taiwan*. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(24), 186–202.
- [8] Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2013). *Techniques and principles in language teaching 3rd edition-Oxford handbooks for language teachers*. Oxford university press.
- [9] Littlewood, W., William, L., & Swan, M. (1981). *Communicative language teaching: An introduction*. Cambridge university press.
- [10] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge university press.
- [11] Hu, W. H. . (2010). *Communicative language teaching in the chinese environment*. *US-China education review*, 7, 78-82.
- [12] Yang, R. (2004). *Teaching English to primary school students in the People's Republic of China*. *Global English and Primary Schools: Challenges for Elementary Education*, 73–93.