How to Implement Communicative Language Teaching in Chinese Senior High Schools

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emerged in the 1960s as a response to the limitations of traditional grammar-translation approaches, emphasizes the functional use of language and practical language use in real life. It has been recognized as an effective approach in English teaching. However, integrating CLT into the English curriculum in Chinese senior high schools faces numerous obstacles, including cultural barriers, large class sizes, limited resources, and students' reluctance. Aiming to harness the full potential of CLT in senior high school English teaching, this article critically examines the adoption problems in Chinese senior high schools and proposes some practical strategies to solve the problems. The significance of learner-centered teaching, collaborative activities, authentic context and comprehensive assessment is emphasized. By addressing these challenges and implementing appropriate strategies, we can significantly improve the effectiveness of CLT in Chinese senior high schools, empowering students to use English for meaningful communication and prepare them for the next phase of their academic and professional lives.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching, senior high, English teaching, Chinese language learning context.

1. Introduction

A new tendency in language instruction made its way into classrooms during the 1960s when notable linguists such as Chomsky (1957) questioned the language theories underlying the Audiolingual Method and the Situational Language Teaching Method. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in response to the limitations of traditional grammar-translation approaches to language learning, which focused excessively on linguistic accuracy and form rather than on communication and practical language use (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.65). CLT shifted the emphasis to a more student-centered, interactive learning environment where students are actively engaged in using the language for meaningful communication. CLT, which emphasizes the functional use of language and its application in real-life situations, can empower senior high school students to move to the next phase of their academic and professional lives.

Even though the importance of CLT in English instruction has been acknowledged, there are some challenges when implementing CLT in the actual classrooms in Chinese senior high schools. Traditional teaching methods and curriculum designs often prioritize grammar and vocabulary knowledge over communication skills (He, 2016). Moreover, factors such as large class sizes, limited resources, and students' misconceptions pose additional hurdles. Thus, to better integrate CLT into English teaching at the senior high school in our country and harness its full potential, this article critically examines the challenges encountered in its implementation and proposes possible solutions for effective utilization. By addressing these challenges and implementing these strategies, we can significantly improve the effectiveness of

CLT in Chinese high schools. This will not only enhance students' communicative competence but also empower them to pursue language-related life goals.

2. Problem Identification

2.1. Theoretical basis of CLT

CLT has its profound linguistic theoretical basis. In the 1950s, Chomsky proposed the concept of linguistic competence, arguing that native language learners possess a set of grammatical rules in their brains that enable them to construct sentences and communicate. In other words, everyone is born with the talent and instinct for language learning, which serves as the premise for applying CLT in teaching. Based on Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence, Hymes (1972) proposed the theory of communicative competence, which not only encompasses the concept of linguistic ability, but also involves the ability for language use, considering the feasibility, appropriateness, and purpose in a specific context. Canale and Swain (1980) further elaborated that communicative competence is composed of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. In 1995, Halliday proposed Functional Grammar which advocates for the integration of linguistics with sociolinguistics and pragmatics. This theory enables language to be more socially functional and serves as a robust complement to Hymes' view of communicative competence. Consequently, it has garnered the most widespread influence and acceptance in explaining the concept of communicative competence.

2.2. Problems when implementing CLT in Chinese Senior High Schools

2.2.1. Cultural and educational barriers

Cultural factors play a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of CLT implementation in our country. CLT stipulates that instructional methods should prioritize learner-centered approach, which involves nurturing learners' autonomy and facilitating active communication between teacher and learners, as well as among the learners themselves. However, in the traditional Chinese educational setting, it is common for students to take on a passive role in the classroom, showing reluctance to spontaneously express their thoughts or challenge existing ideas (He, 2016). This phenomenon stems from a deeply ingrained cultural respect for authority and a pedagogical focus on rote learning, where students primarily function as recipients of knowledge, rather than active participants in the learning process. Moreover, Zhen (2002) found that in CLT classrooms, some students have become accustomed to the traditional language teaching style, which is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered approach and an emphasis on rote memory. Thus, due to cultural and educational differences, there are bound to be certain difficulties in the application of CLT in our country.

2.2.2. Large-size EFL classes

CLT has been criticized for not being fully aligned with the EFL situation in our country. On the one hand, many classrooms in China accommodate a large number of students, which can pose challenges for implementing CLT. Just as Wang (2000:35) said, CLT was developed in Europe and conducted mostly in small classes, thus whether it is practical in Chinese large-size class becomes a question. CLT thrives on student interaction and personalized feedback, both of which are difficult to achieve in an environment with limited teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction.

On the other hand, there is a significant lack of exposure to authentic language use in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China. Subsequent researchers provided additional insights and clarifications to wang's findings. Le (2021) pointed out that CLT was originally developed for English as a Second Language (ESL) countries where English is the official language of the nation, while EFL learning often takes place in settings where the

language plays less major role in the community and is primarily learned only in the classroom. Thus EFL situation can be a constraint for using communicative activities due to the different purpose of learning English, learning environments, and lack of authentic English materials.

2.2.3. Exam-focused assessment system

The assessment system, which is heavily weighted towards examinations, hinders CLT implementation in our country. CLT emphasizes the development of students' communicative abilities through active participation, collaboration, and real-world language use. However, the exam-focused assessment system tends to prioritize linguistic knowledge and grammatical rules, rather than evaluating students' ability to communicate effectively (Liu &Xu, 2021). This misalignment between CLT's goals and the assessment system results in several problems. Firstly, students may focus on preparing for exams at the expense of developing their communication skills, which are not often tested. Just as Zhen (2002) reported, some students said that if they get too involved in the communicative activities, they may not have sufficient time to study grammar and vocabulary for the test.

Secondly, teachers may be pressured to teach to the test, focusing more on grammar and vocabulary rather than facilitating meaningful communication in the classroom (Zhen & Xu, 2021). This results in a lack of opportunities for students to practice and improve their communication skills. In summary, exam-focused assessment system that prioritizes students' test-taking skills rather than their communicative abilities is bound to hinder the effectiveness of CLT in our country.

3. Strategies for Better Implementing CLT in Chinese Senior High Schools

3.1. Adopting learner-centered teaching

To achieve effective CLT, it is crucial to move beyond traditional teaching concepts that rely heavily on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction. Instead, teacher must cultivate an environment where learners are at the center of the learning process. Wang (2018) stated that in a learner-centered classroom, teachers should act more as facilitators, guiding students towards discovery rather than simply providing answers. Teachers should create an interactive and supportive learning environment where students feel encouraged to speak and engage in meaningful conversations. This can be achieved through the use of role-plays, and pair or group work, which allow students to practice language in authentic contexts.

On the other hand, students should move from being passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in their own learning journey. This transformation involves self-reflection, goal-setting, self-regulated learning strategies and self-assessment. Furthermore, Chu and Qiao (2019) highlighted that language teachers in China should implement CLT from the earliest stages of education, so that students can gradually become accustomed to this teaching approach and recognize their pivotal role in the learning process. In conclusion, adopting a learner-centered teaching approach is essential for effectively implementing CLT in Chinese senior high schools.

3.2. Facilitating collaborative learning and authentic practices

For the problem of too many learners in a lesson, collaborative learning is an ideal solution. Collaborative learning, by encouraging students to collaborate in small groups or pairs to attain shared learning objectives, not only empower students to assume greater responsibility for their learning, but also cultivates a sense of community and mutual support among learners. Ling (2016) proposed three strategies to enhance the effectiveness of cooperative learning in groups: firstly, designing student-centered cooperative tasks with information gaps; secondly, clarifying group member tasks based on individual differences; lastly, strengthening teachers' role in process supervision and evaluation.

For the problem that students in EFL situations have limited opportunities to use the language in real life, it is crucial for the teacher to create authentic contexts that foster language use. To enhance contextual authenticity, Yu (2011) advocated that teachers should align the context with learners' characteristics, teaching content, and contemporary educational modalities. Specifically, topics that allow students to draw ideas directly from their immediate surroundings and personal experiential circumstances tend to be more effective and engaging than abstract ones (Guo & Xu.J &Xu.X, 2020). Moreover, teachers can encourage students to use authentic materials and complete authentic tasks, providing students with opportunities and platforms for language use (Li & Lv, 2014). By doing so, teachers can effectively bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world, enabling students to develop their language skills in a meaningful and practical way.

3.3.   Adjusting traditional assessment system

One of the factors which cause the adoption of CLT in EFL classrooms to be less successful or even unfeasible relates to the assessment system. In Chinese high schools, the assessment of students heavily rely on examinations or tests, which are exclusively grammar-focused (Zhen & Xu, 2021; Wang, 2000). Moreover, lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments has proved to be the major constraint for successful CLT (Chang & Goswami, 2011; Memari, 2013). Thus, an obvious solution to these problems is to adjust the current assessment system with regard to its content and format.

Firstly, modifying the grammar-based examination tends to be absolutely necessary. The practice of test-driven teaching and learning is unlikely to be curtailed or eliminated until such form-based exams and tests are improved and updated (Memari, 2013). Moreover, communicative tasks are suggested to be included in the examination, which can be more likely to motivate students to pay more attention to and be more willing to participate actively in communicative class activities.

Secondly, developing effective and practical assessment instruments for evaluating students' communicative competence is of great significance. Brown (2001）provided assessment criteria for students' oral production, called oral proficiency test scoring categories, which includes grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task. Furthermore, students could receive assessment focusing on communicative competence from different evaluators, such as themselves, peers and teachers.

4. Conclusion

The integration of CLT into Chinese senior high school English curricula presents both opportunities and challenges. While CLT offers a student-centered, interactive learning environment that emphasizes meaningful communication and practical language use, its implementation in real classrooms is often hindered by traditional teaching concepts, large class sizes, limited authentic resources, and students' low motivation. However, by critically examining these challenges and implementing targeted strategies, we can overcome these obstacles and harness the full potential of CLT. By prioritizing communication skills, fostering a student-centered learning environment, and leveraging available resources, we can harness the full potential of CLT and empower students to use English for meaningful communication in their daily lives, academic pursuits, and future careers. The success of this endeavor lies in the collaborative efforts of teachers, administrators, and students themselves.

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