

# Misunderstandings of Communicative Approach in College English Teaching

Yuxuan Zhang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jiao Chen<sup>b</sup>, Hongning Tian<sup>c</sup>

Xi'an, Research Institute of Hi-Tech, Xi'an, China

<sup>a,\*</sup>Shootingstar0715@126.com, <sup>b</sup>827321076@qq.com, <sup>c</sup>hntian@163.com

**Abstract.** The Communicative Approach, started in the 70s, focus on real communication and interaction. This approach is prevalent in English teaching as it proposed an alternative to the then ubiquitous systems-oriented approaches. In the Communicative Approach, instead of focusing on the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar, it emphasizes the development of learner's competence to communicate in real-life situations. In other words, it aims at cultivating communicative competence rather than the grammatical or linguistic competence. Although the Communicative Approach is an effective method to teach English, it is often misunderstood and misused by many English teachers, especially college English teachers. This thesis explains what the essence of communicative teaching method is, what are its characteristics, and what misunderstandings teachers usually have about it, in the hope that the Communicative Approach can be used correctly and effectively in college English teaching and students can actually increase their English competence from this approach.

**Keywords:** College English Teaching; The Communicative Approach; Misunderstandings.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, traditional English teaching methods have been questioned by many people. They think that the traditional English teaching mode cannot keep up with the times and can only create dumb English learners who can only deals with grammar problems. Therefore, to cultivate students' practical communicative ability, the communicative approach has been greatly welcomed in college English teaching. The communicative approach has been popular in my country for nearly 20 years, but most teachers have a very one-sided understanding of the communicative method, thinking that the communicative method is a simple oral language teaching method, and many teachers misunderstand and exaggerate the use of the communicative method in teaching.

## 2. Definition of the Communicative Approach

The communicative approach originated in Europe in the early 1970s, with the United Kingdom as its center, and its founder was the British linguist Wilkins. His 1976 publication of the *Notional Syllabus* was instrumental in the development and widespread application of the communicative approach [1]. The communicative approach aims to cultivate a teaching method system that uses language to communicate in a specific social context, and is a teaching method school with great influence all over the world. It insists that the purpose of language teaching is to cultivate students' ability to communicate in the target language [2]. In short, the communicative approach does not emphasize grammar, but pays attention to the practical use of language in real life, paying attention to students' learning motivation, enthusiasm for learning and the mastery of knowledge and skills. The communicative approach places particular emphasis on the meaning of language rather than its structure.

## 3. The Characteristics of Communicative Approach

The communicative approach emphasizes the meaning of language and the transmission of information in the process of using it, and does not pay attention to the structure of language. That is to say, the communicative approach does not emphasize grammar, and students are allowed to have

some grammatical mistakes in classroom activities [3]. But this is not to say that the communicative method excludes grammar teaching. Communicative competence must be built on the basis of language competence, and good language competence is the foundation of good communication. Besides, the teaching content is not arranged in terms of grammar items, nor does it copy the language of textbooks. Instead, according to the actual needs of learners, the most authentic and natural language materials are selected to truly restore the communication scene.

Most importantly, the communicative approach emphasizes the student-centered approach. Different from traditional classroom teachers who decide the teaching content by themselves, the communicative method should focus on the different needs of different students, take students as the center, and formulate teaching content that meets the real needs of students. The arrangement of teaching activities should focus on the students, and encourage learners to exert their initiative and enthusiasm in language use in real communication scenarios to the greatest extent. The main feature of the communicative approach can be summarized as follows [4]:

- Communicative interaction for communicative activities (Emphasis on meaning rather than form).
- Target language used as a natural medium for classroom management and instruction.
- Classroom should provide opportunities for rehearsal of real-life situations and provide opportunity for real communication
- Emphasis on oral and listening skills in the classroom
- Use of everyday language
- Use of authentic resources such as newspaper, magazines, manuals, recipes, videos, etc.

## **4. Some Misunderstandings in the Use of Communicative Methods**

### **4.1 The Overuse of Communicative Approach**

The communicative method emphasizes taking students as the main body and the center of the teaching activities. The role of the teacher changes from the absolute leader of the traditional classroom to the designer and organizer of classroom activities, so that students can give full play to their initiative and fully participate in the classroom, and actively use language in situations created by teachers. However, in the actual classroom application, it is misunderstood by some teachers and is overused [5]. The communicative method occupies a large proportion in the teaching arrangements and teaching plans, and some even take the communicative method as the main body of the teaching content.

Communicative method is a teaching method rather than a teaching purpose. It should occupy a certain proportion in daily teaching, but it should not dominate the classroom content. This wrong approach will result in a fact that students actually learn very little in the classroom. In the actual classroom, not everyone can participate in the communicative method, and some students even take advantage of it. For them, most of the time is wasted in admiring the performances of their classmates. The first thing to pay attention to when using the communicative method correctly is the proportion of the communicative method in the classroom [6].

### **4.2 Activity Oriented Teaching Design**

When many teachers mention communicative approach, they think of group discussions or role-playing games. Many teachers are afraid that their classrooms will be labeled as "traditional and outdated", so they blindly pursue the so called "cheerful atmosphere" brought by all kinds of classroom activities and various innovative classroom activity designs. Thus, classroom activities

have become a show. As a result, there is a strange phenomenon that activities are more important than everything else in the classroom.

However, the education of college students is different from that of primary school students. College English teaching has higher requirements for the depth and breadth of the language. In the teaching process, it is necessary to avoid such low-level teaching methods. Some learning content still needs to be acquired through the traditional learning mode. The communicative method is not a gimmick, and it is absolutely impossible to learn foreign languages only through the communicative method. Of course, this does not mean that classroom activities cannot be carried out, but the communication method is by no means as simple as some teachers think, and classroom activities must be carefully and elaborately designed. Classroom activities cannot be carried out for the wrong purpose. The design of each activity should have its meaning and purpose behind it, that is to say, it cannot be a mere formality.

### 4.3 Communicative Competence Equals Spoken English

Because the communicative method emphasizes the practical application of language, some teachers equate the communicative method with oral language teaching, and believe that the communicative method cultivates the ability of oral communication. However, communicative competence includes not only spoken language but also written communicative competence. For example, the communication of letters and emails also belongs to communicative competence. Therefore, the cultivation of communicative competence is not only a simple oral expression, but also a comprehensive communicative competence cultivation. The communicative method of teaching should not be limited to classroom activities. As long as it is an activity that can improve students' communicative ability, such as reading and writing, which can also be a means of communicative teaching.

## 5. Summary

The communicative approach is indeed helpful to the improvement of students' speaking ability, but it is far from enough and unrealistic to really improve the English proficiency only by the communicative method. Communicative approach should be an important teaching method in English teaching, rather than the main body of teaching activities. Any communication activity should be built on the basis of language ability. The focus of teaching should be the cultivation of language ability, otherwise it will only lead to the stagnation of English competence. Classroom activities should be designed on the premise of real improvement of knowledge and language competence, not just engaging in activities for the sake of the form of activities. After careful design, classroom teaching activities that allow students to benefit from it are the truly successful communicative teaching methods.

## References

- [1] Canale, M. From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy, Language and Communication. London: Longman,1983, p56-59.
- [2] Brown, H. D. Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy (2nd Ed). New York: A.W. Longman, Inc, 2001, p.36-38.
- [3] Yu-pei He. Application of Communicative Teaching Method in English Teaching. Journal of Jilin Teachers Institute of Engineering and Technology. Vol.7(2008) p. 26-27.
- [4] Information on: <https://moroccoenglish.com>.
- [5] Ai-qun Ding. On Disadvantages and Ways to Improve the Communicative Approach to English Teaching. Journal of Wuxi Institute of Technology. Vol.4(2006) p. 62-64.
- [6] Nai-mei Liu, She-ru Zhang. Another Understanding of Communicative Teaching. Theory and Practice of Education. Vol.24(2003) p. 32-33.