

An Comprehensive Overview of Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract

As a significant aspect in the history of teaching approaches, communicative teaching deserves our deep contemplation for its significance and value. This article attempts to explore the development process of communicative teaching in the history of Chinese education, starting from its origin background. It aims to redefine its essential characteristics and further examine some highlights and shortcomings of communicative teaching. In addition, with the help of existing research, explore the practical application of communicative approaches in English teaching and propose certain teaching application suggestions. Finally, some comments and prospects were made on the future of communicative teaching.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Language Teaching; Teaching Approach.

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching as a approach that cultivates learners' communicative abilities in language, after being introduced from the West in the late 1970s, has become the longest-lasting and widely accepted teaching method in history. It has successively gone through the stages of theoretical research, integration with curriculum and teaching materials research, and multi-angle connection with teaching practice research. According to the publication data of CNKI, the number of papers on communicative language teaching reached its peak around 2007. After that, Chinese scholars' attention to communicative language teaching has slightly decreased, but this does not mean that the influence of communicative language teaching is not as strong as before.

Based on this, this article attempts to explore the theoretical characteristics and basic principles of communicative teaching from its origin and development stages, analyze its strengths and weaknesses, and thus stimulate some thoughts, suggestions, comments and future prospects for communicative language teaching.

2. The Historical Analyzes of Communicative Language Teaching

The decline of one teaching method and the rise of another new teaching method. The succession of teaching methods is deeply related to the historical and social background in which they exist. To learn a new teaching method, we must first understand its background and origin, and then gradually analyze its historical development process.

2.1. The Origin of CLT

In the 1950s and 1960s, various European countries widely adopted the audio-lingual method and audio-visual method in foreign language teaching. These two teaching methods focused on explaining and training language form systems, while neglecting the cultivation of actual communicative ability in language. In the 1970s, with the rapid development of science and technology around the world, frequent exchanges of economy, culture, and technology among

countries became increasingly common. In this situation, there was an urgent need to cultivate a large number of specialized personnel with foreign language communication skills. The old teaching methods clearly could no longer meet the requirements. Later, after three years of collaborative research by language and education experts in Western Europe, a new curriculum for teaching major European languages was developed. This marked the birth of communicative language teaching. As a result, a series of representative works on communicative language teaching were published, and this teaching method emerged and gradually developed and improved in such a historical context.

Chomsky first proposed the theory of language acquisition, emphasizing that every human being has an innate ability to learn language. Later, sociolinguist Hymes questioned Chomsky's theory and introduced the concept of communicative competence[1]. Canale and Swain then further analyzed communicative competence into four component parts[2]. Savignon further stated that all four elements of communicative competence are important, and that they interact with each other, so learners must engage in numerous real-life situations to gain communicative competence. Represented by Richards, Rodgers, and Vygotsky, the theory constructivism introduced three learning principles for communicative teaching, as well as social interaction theory and scaffolding theory.

Constructivists and sociolinguists have gone through continuous theoretical exploration and innovation, constructing relevant theories for language learning and applying communicative teaching methods in language learning. With the "learner-centered" teaching concept, the situational teaching view of learning language in a real context, and the interactive and active teaching philosophy, they have laid the foundation for the formation and development of communicative teaching methods.

2.2. The Development of CLT in China

The Communicative Language Teaching was introduced into English language classrooms in China in the 1970s. Its development can be roughly divided into three stages: the introduction stage, where foreign communicative teaching theories were introduced and attempted in classroom teaching; the acceptance and application stage, where CLT was widely accepted and applied, and during which the syllabus was revised and textbooks were developed, greatly promoting the integration of theory and practice; and the development stage, where the research level and scale of CLT reached a "peaceful and rational" development, presenting a prosperous development situation[3].

For decades, communicative language teaching has taken root and flourished in China, and its concepts and ideas have deeply permeated English teaching in our country. Communicative language teaching is the need for curriculum reform to cultivate students' pragmatic abilities, and it has changed the past teaching situation that placed too much emphasis on grammar and vocabulary. It also meets the needs of the new curriculum to cultivate students' core competence by developing their communicative and pragmatic abilities. At the same time, the "student-centered" philosophy in communicative teaching coincides with the teaching concept that we advocate now.

3. Definition and Characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching

When studying a teaching approach, after clarifying its historical origins and development path, we need to have a clear understanding of its definition and connotation, analyze its theoretical basis, as well as identify some unique characteristics that distinguish it from other teaching methods.

3.1. The Definition of CLT

3.1.1. Misunderstanding

Since the concept of communicative teaching entered people's field of vision, different people have different understandings of it. Therefore, in the early stages of development, there were some misunderstandings about communicative teaching. In 1996, Thompson identified four major misconceptions about communicative language teaching: that it means not teaching grammar; that it means only teaching oral communication; that it means organizing group activities such as role-playing; and that it places excessive demands on teachers[4]. These misunderstandings lead people to believe that communication skills do not include language ability, but only simple speaking skills, and make teachers think they can ignore the language errors made by learners in the learning process[5]. These ideas obviously deviate from the original intention of communicative teaching and misunderstand its true core concepts.

In my opinion, the reason why people have misunderstandings about communicative language teaching is, on the one hand, because in the first few decades, the research and development of communicative language teaching methods progressed rapidly, leading to some deviation from the original intention in practice. On the other hand, it is because at that time, the theoretical understanding of communicative language teaching among language teaching researchers and teachers was not comprehensive enough, leading to misunderstandings.

3.1.2. What is CLT

Communicative language teaching is best considered an approach that uses interaction as a means and goal for second language acquisition[6]. As Charles and Rogers have said, "Communicative teaching has neither any written or authoritative statement, nor any recognized authoritative model." [7] Linguistics points out that students not only need to produce accurately in the classroom, but also need to be able to use them appropriately when communicating outside of the classroom. This means having communicative competence - knowing when and how to say what to whom. Communicative teaching is just that, promoting effective communication and cultivating students' "communicative competence" by creating an interactive and realistic environment.

3.2. Characteristics of CLT

3.2.1. Communicative Competence

According to Howatt, there are two versions of CLT—strong version and weak one. For weak version, learners first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use it in communication. While for another, it claims that language is acquired through communication[8]. Regardless of which version of the perspective, communication and interaction are the top priority in language learning and are also the core of CLT. The goal of Communicative Language Teaching is to form students' communicative competence, Hymes claims that including four aspects : grammar, feasibility, appropriateness and reality[9]. Further, Canal and Swain developed the concept of "communicative competence", they believed the competence should include grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic aspects[10]. From this, we can see that communicative competence is the core idea and concept of CLT, and it is also its most prominent feature.

3.2.2. Application Principles

According to communicative language teaching theory, the purpose of language learning is to acquire communicative ability. In the process from theory to practice, various communicative activities involving a lot of interaction among learners are needed, and these activities have principles that distinguish them from other teaching approaches. Richards and Rodgers claimed some key principles:[7] communication principle requires activities that involve real communication promote learning; task principle means activities in which language is used for

carrying meaningful tasks to promote learning; meaningfulness principle claims language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Based on these implementation principles, some common activities are used in communicative teaching. For example: role-playing, interviews, speeches, and so on. Therefore, learners acquire language knowledge and communication skills through active participation and interaction in communicative settings.

3.2.3. Meaning, Context and Authentic Materials

In communicative language teaching, meaning and context are extremely important, they are the core of language learning. Based on the definition and principles of the CLT, communication content must be meaningful and within a certain context. Many researchers who support communicative methods focus their research on the nature and appropriateness of meaning in specific contexts[11]. For example, Wilkins roughly divides communicative meanings into two types, referred to as "conceptual categories" and "communicative function categories". The first refers to concepts such as time, order, location, quantity, and frequency, while the second refers to requests, offers, refusals, complaints, and persuasion[12].

At the same time, meaning is expressed through authentic language in context. Here, it is particularly emphasized that another characteristic of communicative language teaching is the use of authentic materials. Authentic language data can include media used in daily communication such as conversations, newspapers, books, and television advertisements. Authentic language is typically based on a context and is a part of a larger communicative context. Therefore, in communicative teaching, as much as possible, authentic language materials will be provided for learners, creating communication environments that are closer to reality, and promoting more authentic dialogue and communication between learners.

4. Strengthens and Drawbacks of Communicative Language Teaching

For a teaching approach, experts from different schools of thought will have different opinions on it. In the process of applying teaching methods to teaching practice, different teaching methods also have their own advantages and limitations, so communicative language teaching is no exception.

4.1. Strengthens of CLT

Since its introduction, communicative language teaching has continued to develop and internalize. Compared with other teaching methods, its advantages are very significant. The most obvious advantage of teaching communicative language is that it can effectively improve students' fluency in speaking the target language. The communicative teaching approach focuses on developing students' communicative abilities, emphasizing the mastery of language communication skills, and reflects the social nature and function of language.

Secondly, communicative language teaching advocates for student-centered teaching activities, focusing on the students themselves and considering them as the main characters in their own learning, changing the previous passive situation of "teacher authority" and "one-size-fits-all" teaching. The teacher's main role is to give students an opportunity to express or share their thoughts and opinions, by allowing students to be real communicators and have more opportunities to interact freely in the classroom. Through this teaching method, students' initiative and enthusiasm for learning a foreign language can be maximally aroused, and they will truly desire and need to communicate.

At the same time, communicative teaching has increased students' speaking time to a certain extent in the classroom, providing them with opportunities to fully express their opinions, explore their language potential, and creatively learn language rules. Giving students more time in the classroom provides them with more opportunities to showcase their performance, fosters their communication and collaboration skills, and makes it easier for them to participate

in engaging and interesting activities. This can also help to some extent in avoiding or eliminating some students' fear and aversion towards attending classes.

Finally, due to communicative teaching, students are provided with many opportunities to learn and acquire language communication skills and abilities in unexpected situations, subconsciously gaining language knowledge. In communicative teaching, students are motivated to learn another language in an environment closely related to their daily lives, and they learn the target language through mutual communication in communicative classes.

4.2. Drawbacks of CLT

However, everything in the world has its advantages and disadvantages, and so does communicative language teaching. As mentioned by Fang Anju[13], the theoretical foundation of the CLT determines that there will be many insurmountable problems in practice, mainly involving various aspects from the language itself to teachers and students. Firstly, in implementing communicative teaching, how to coordinate the relationship between language functions and language structures, how many language function categories are there in English teaching, and how to arrange their teaching order scientifically; secondly, there will inevitably be many language errors when students freely use language communication in class, how to correct them in a timely manner without affecting students' free expression, and how teachers can grasp moderate control without letting go, etc. These issues have not been resolved yet.

In addition, communicative teaching method provides teachers with many new classroom games, which greatly expands various forms of organizing communicative activities and is interesting and inspiring for students. However, these teaching activities require a lot of time, which means that communicative teaching may only be suitable for use in small classes. Therefore, time is a major factor limiting communicative teaching. So, CLT is not suitable for classrooms with too many students, as teachers cannot conduct detailed needs and personality analyses for each student when faced with a large number of students. This may result in failure to consider the differences in each student's activity design and goal setting, leading to failure to achieve the expected teaching objectives. In addition, it will be more difficult to conduct communication activities in too many classrooms. The efficiency of teacher guidance and control will decrease, and the opportunity for each student to participate in activities will be greatly reduced.

It is worth noting that in the process of using communicative teaching, teachers play a special and important role. How to adopt appropriate methods and organically combine the communicative function and language structure in realistic situations, so that students can creatively acquire language rules in natural communication, is not just a simple application of communicative teaching, but a teaching art. This puts high demands on the training of teachers. Teaching art cannot be fully improved by mastering one or two teaching methods. It is a comprehensive indicator of teachers' various qualities. It not only requires teachers to have good professional ethics, teaching attitude, and solid professional knowledge, but also requires them to have a broad knowledge base, not only good at learning from books, but also good at learning from society, and consciously cultivate multiple interests and hobbies. Only in this way can communicative teaching be flexibly used according to the content of the textbook, the teaching object, and the teaching environment.

Finally, we need to note that communicative teaching method has its specific social background and scope of application. This also reflects that communicative teaching is more influenced by the language and teaching environment compared to other types of teaching. Some education practitioners in our country have not fully considered the specific foreign language teaching and learning environment in China, resulting in certain difficulties in the application process.

5. Some Possible Suggestions for the Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching

Learning a teaching method is not just about knowing and understanding it, but more importantly, learning how to use it in teaching practice. Teachers should actively introduce new teaching methods in their teaching activities and use these methods to fully stimulate students' interest in learning, promote classroom teaching reform, and further promote the development of students' overall English proficiency.

5.1. Some Researches for the Implementation of CLT

How to apply communicative teaching methods in foreign language teaching is currently the focus of many studies. Some researchers have proposed their own teaching strategies and teaching models for communicative language teaching. Zhong Min proposed the theoretical foundation and characteristics of communicative teaching approach, advocating that the communicative principles and tolerance principles should be followed in actual teaching based on communicative teaching method[14]. Hu Xiaoyi and Hu Haijian first clarified the significance and theory of communicative teaching approach, and then proposed four teaching paths and the strategy of generating teaching paths of communicative teaching approach[3]. Lian Mei mainly analyzed the application of communicative teaching method in secondary school English classrooms. In addition to communication and student-centeredness, the characteristics of communicative teaching method also include individualized instruction[15]. Liu Qinglin believes that the application of communicative teaching method in English classroom teaching requires the use of teaching content and methods combined with real life, intensive teaching and practice, communicative teaching process, student-centeredness, and encouragement of students to use language consciously, stimulating students' enthusiasm for communication in English[16].

In addition, some researchers have also put forward some insights on the application of communicative approach in classroom activities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Zhou Qi starts by addressing the current situation of English listening and speaking teaching, pointing out the poor actual English proficiency of students. He then presents the theoretical foundation and basic principles of communicative teaching method, and further suggests that introducing communicative teaching method in English listening and speaking teaching can effectively improve students' classroom learning outcomes[17]. Liu Fan mainly emphasizes the impact and reflection of communicative method on English grammar teaching, proposing that communicative teaching method should follow the principles of creating information gap and not necessarily correcting language errors[18].

5.2. Some Possible Suggestions

Based on the literature and research I have consulted, combined with my own teaching practices, I propose some strategies and suggestions that can be used by English teachers in communicative-based classrooms.

First, dig deep into the communicative resources in the teaching materials. In English teaching practice, when applying communicative teaching methods, teachers should have a comprehensive understanding of the content of the teaching materials as the basis. They should conduct in-depth research on the communicative resources contained in the materials and apply them to actual communication activities, strengthen teacher-student interaction, and continuously improve the efficiency of classroom teaching to ensure that students can enhance their English knowledge and application abilities through teacher-student interaction. Pay attention to the application of certain sentence patterns in students' actual lives, and then guide students to use these sentence patterns for communication activities through the design of communicative situations. At the same time, teachers can use communicative teaching methods

to exercise students' English communication abilities during teaching activities, which helps students to transform commonly used sentence patterns and create good conditions for subsequent learning activities. Students can also gradually explore scientific and effective learning methods through the transformation of language expression, thereby improving their English learning abilities.

Next, design diverse classroom activities. In English teaching activities, teachers should pay attention to the organic integration of communicative teaching methods in classroom teaching activities in order to promote students' English communication skills, and actively design diverse classroom activities. At the beginning of classroom teaching activities, teachers can apply the English content taught in this lesson to design corresponding communicative situations, and encourage students to actively participate in situational dialogue activities in groups. The important purpose of designing this teaching activity is to create a good classroom teaching atmosphere through the design of situational dialogue activities, and stimulate students' interest in learning English knowledge and English communication awareness. After the situational dialogue, the teacher should explain the content of the article in detail to the students, and based on this, complete the design of the classroom teaching situation. Then, invite students to stand on the podium and carry out situational simulation dialogue activities to help students deepen their understanding of the English knowledge they have mastered.

At the same time, promote good interaction between teachers and students. In teaching activities, teachers should not only pay attention to student-student interaction but also strengthen teacher-student interaction in order to enhance students' communication skills. Compared with student-student interaction, teacher-student interaction places higher demands on students' knowledge and abilities. In order to effectively carry out teacher-student communication, students need to flexibly apply their acquired knowledge to answer the teacher's questions, thus achieving practical application of what they have learned and improving their communication skills. Therefore, in the practice of teaching English in junior high school, one important way for teachers to improve students' communication skills is to base teacher-student interaction on students' actual situations and specific performances. If students have strong communication skills, teachers can appropriately increase the difficulty of English expression to enhance students' comprehension abilities. If students have weak English communication skills, teachers can appropriately reduce the difficulty of English expression to enhance students' confidence in oral expression.

Finally, it should be noted that communicative approach should be used as a teaching method in the classroom, rather than the sole method. A successful classroom should be a combination of various teaching methods. Teaching language knowledge is inseparable from traditional teaching methods. Therefore, the timing and sequence of communicative activities are very important. We should pay attention to the connection between communicative activities and knowledge teaching, and not blindly pursue communicative effectiveness at the expense of incomplete knowledge learning. For example, after teaching new vocabulary in the classroom, we can choose to engage in some communicative activities to help students reinforce the meaning and usage of the words they have just learned.

6. Reflections and Prospects of Communicative Language Teaching

6.1. Comments

The status of communicative teaching method in foreign language teaching is beyond debate, and the teaching results it has achieved are worth pondering. Whether it is positive praise for communicative teaching or pointing out shortcomings, we need to understand that any teaching methodology theory can only develop and innovate by starting from the actual situation in China and combining it with the reality of Chinese English teachers, and by

extensively absorbing the reasonable elements of various existing teaching methodologies. This is the way forward for communicative teaching methods.

We should hold a historical and dialectical attitude towards communicative teaching methods. The emergence and widespread adoption of communicative teaching methods does not mean that the original teaching methods and techniques have been replaced, but rather it allows us to reevaluate and reassess them within a new theoretical framework based on a broader understanding of learning and communication concepts. Emphasizing the use of communicative methods in certain teaching activities does not imply that language is merely a functional system and not a structural system, and that there is no need to teach grammar structures to students anymore. In fact, the functions and structures of language are like two sides of a blade, interconnected and mutually dependent.

6.2. Change and Future

The exploration and research of Communicative Language Teaching has been going on for several decades, and its current development may face some bottlenecks. Constraints from traditional teaching theories, challenges from new teaching theories, regional limitations and differences, as well as some immaturity in the theoretical framework itself, will all hinder the future development of communicative language teaching. Therefore, we need to build a clear and actionable communicative teaching path, construct a theoretical system of communicative teaching methods with the ultimate goal of developing communicative competence, and promote the integration, complementation, and development of communicative teaching methods from a cultural perspective[3].

Nowadays, the succession of times and the advancement of technology have brought more new possibilities to the future of communication teaching. In our country, the research on communicative language teaching has already gone through its peak period. In the future, researchers will update their teaching concepts and combine them with specific contexts, attempting to surpass the limitations of "methods" and enable communicative language teaching to play a better role in foreign language classroom instruction in our country. The future of communicative teaching may not exist as a separate teaching method, but its core principles and essence will leave a deep imprint at each stage as time changes.

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