

# The Evolution and Effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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## Abstract

**Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as a pedagogical approach that prioritizes the practical application of language, has exerted a profound influence in the field of foreign language instruction both domestically and internationally since its theoretical underpinnings were established in 1966. This article summarizes recent domestic and international research on CLT, explores its theoretical foundation and practical application in teaching, compares the similarities and differences between CLT and other teaching methods, and analyzes the advantages and challenges of CLT in foreign language teaching. At the same time, the article looks ahead to the future development trends and research directions of CLT, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for foreign language educators.**

## Keywords

**Communicative Language Teaching; Foreign Language Teaching; Literature Review.**

## 1. Introduction

English is a language, and the aim of teaching it is to empower students to communicate effectively in English. Language serves as a medium of communication, and the acquisition of foreign language knowledge and communication skills depends on specific communicative activities, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The English teaching syllabus also explicitly requires that English teaching should cultivate students' communicative abilities. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as a teaching method aimed at cultivating students' language communicative abilities, has gradually gained widespread attention and application worldwide since its emergence in Western Europe in the early 1970s.

## 2. Notion and Theory of Communicative Language Teaching Approach

The communicative approach, a methodology employed in second language instruction, aims primarily at fostering learners' communicative proficiency. Its roots in language pedagogy extend back to the latter half of the 1960s. Prior to its emergence, a succession of teaching methods—including the Direct Method, Grammar-Translation Method, and Audio-Lingual Method—had dominated second language acquisition for substantial periods. Advancements in technology and science, coupled with heightened global interactions, sparked a realization among linguistic theorists. They discerned a long-standing oversight in linguistic studies: the disregard for contextual meaning. This realization underscored the urgency to enhance students' capacity to engage in English communication with non-native speakers, prompting educators and linguists to advocate for a shift in language teaching practices. Thus, the communicative approach emerged as an innovative teaching strategy.

The origin of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) is deeply influenced by the theoretical contributions of linguists Hymes and Chomsky. Hymes introduced the concept of "communicative competence," which challenged traditional language teaching that focused excessively on grammatical rules and structures, and emphasized that the goal of language

learning is to use it effectively in actual communication [1]. His perspective provided the core theoretical foundation for CLT, arguing that language teaching should focus on developing students' communicative abilities, enabling them to fluently and appropriately use language in real-world contexts. Meanwhile, Chomsky's generative grammar theory also provided linguistic grounding for CLT, particularly the idea of language as an innate and internalized capacity.

Concurrently, sociolinguistics underscores the pivotal role of language in social interaction and communication, advocating that language learning objectives ought to prioritize fostering students' capability to adeptly employ language within authentic social contexts. Conversely, psycholinguistics delves into the psychological underpinnings of language acquisition, highlighting the significance of attending to students' cognitive growth and mental well-being within language instruction. These complementary theories, in unison, constitute the cornerstone of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), offering a robust theoretical framework for an educational approach that prioritizes nurturing students' communicative abilities.

Nowadays, a fresh debate has emerged regarding the "weak" and "strong" variations of the communicative approach (Halliday, 1994). According to Halliday's perspective that year, the strong variant evolved in nations where the primary and secondary public education system emphasizes discourse-based language learning [2]. This strong form of the communicative approach perceives language proficiency as being honed through activities resembling real-world scenarios. Consequently, it is deemed communicative because learners engage with texts resembling real-life situations beyond the classroom. Conversely, the weak variant primarily evolved in private educational institutions, emphasizing oral tasks and group collaborations among learners, with a focus on enhancing their opportunities to communicate in the target language. Halliday (1994) asserts that the strong version offers distinct advantages for language instruction, particularly in regions where English functions as a second language and resources are limited. Nevertheless, scholars also acknowledge a weaker variant, especially in contexts where English is a foreign language. Consequently, we observe that even teachers who adhere to a communicative approach in language instruction often blend elements of structural drills and grammar lessons into their classes.

### **3. Studies on Communicative Language Teaching Approach Abroad and at Home**

#### **3.1. Communicative Language Teaching Approach at Home**

In the 1970s, China embraced the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, revitalizing stale ideologies and prompting revisions in existing educational methodologies. This approach centered on the student, fostering their communicative abilities. By integrating CLT, language learners attained the skill to apply acquired knowledge in practical contexts, fostering effective interpersonal communication. Research on CLT can be broadly categorized into three eras: spanning from the late 1970s to mid-1980s (introduction and inception), mid-to-late 1980s (acceptance and implementation), and from the 1990s onwards, marked by a more refined scale and depth of research endeavors.

In the 1980s, along with China's development, a large number of foreign linguistic theories and foreign language teaching theories have been introduced to China through cultural exchanges and personnel visits, and communicative approach is one of the most important foreign language teaching theories introduced. Communicative English for Chinese Learners, edited by her in 1979, is regarded as a successful combination of the international advanced communicative language teaching theory and Chinese practice.

In the middle and late 1980s, scholars' curiosity and research interest in communicative pedagogy gradually cooled, and people gradually accepted and affirmed the teaching theory of communicative pedagogy with a series of research results. Communicative pedagogy began to embark on the development track in China. In addition, at that time, China ushered in the climax of the development of new teaching syllabus and foreign language teaching materials, and the teaching syllabus and teaching materials combined communicative teaching method to study and compile, which made the development of communicative teaching method in China's foreign language teaching strongly.

Since the 1990s, with the continuous progress and development of society, communication and cooperation both domestically and internationally have become increasingly closely intertwined. As a result, the communicative language teaching method has entered a prosperous stage after undergoing long-term practice and development. More and more schools pay attention to the introduction of communicative language teaching method in foreign language teaching, which effectively promotes the development of communicative teaching method in our country. In this period, the scale and level of theoretical research on communicative teaching have been increasing, and the research on communicative teaching has expanded from the theoretical level to the practical level, and the theory of communicative teaching has been blended and innovated, which has greatly promoted the prosperity and development of communicative teaching method in our country.

### **3.2. Communicative Language Teaching Approach Abroad**

The communicative language teaching approach was born in Europe. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the communication between European countries became increasingly close and gradually integrated, so the fluency of language exchange and communication became more important. Therefore, the communicative language teaching approach with the teaching goal of cultivating foreign language communication ability came into being.

In 1965, Chomsky distinguished between linguistic competence and linguistic performance in his book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. He believes that linguistic competence refers to people's internalization of grammatical rules, which enables us to understand what others say, including sentences heard and unheard, and to create grammatically correct sentences. Language use refers to the speaker's practical application of these rules.

In 1972, Hymes introduced the concept of "communicative competence" in his book "On Communicative Competence", which mainly includes the following four points: 1) judging whether a sentence conforms to grammatical rules; 2) judging whether a sentence falls within people's psychological acceptance range; 3) judging whether a sentence fits the social context; 4) judging whether a sentence is frequently used [3]. Compared to Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence, Hymes' theory of communicative competence places greater emphasis on the ability to use language. He stresses that language is not merely a set of grammatical rules, but also a social communication tool. These four abilities collectively form a complete framework of linguistic communication skills and complement each other in practical communication. Grammatical competence focuses on the accuracy of language forms, sociolinguistic competence emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of language use, discourse competence concentrates on the application of language in actual communication, while strategic competence requires learners to be flexible and adaptable in communication. Each ability plays a distinct role, ensuring smooth communication.

Wells (1981) defines "interaction" as a "cooperative activity" that establishes a trilateral relationship between the sender of information, the receiver of information, and the linguistic environment. Classroom interaction is aimed at communication. Classroom interaction includes teacher presentation, error handling, teacher questioning, learner participation, task-based interaction, and group activities [4].

These discussions indicate that communicative language teaching places particular emphasis on learners' learning objectives and language use, rather than focusing on imparting knowledge of language rules [5].

## **4. Personal Comprehension and Contemplation on the Communicative Language Teaching Approach.**

### **4.1. Comparison with Other Teaching Methods**

Compared to traditional language teaching methods, CLT significantly improves learners' language communication skills through its unique teaching philosophy and practical activities. The following is a comparison between CLT and several other mainstream teaching methods.

Firstly, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) excels in its emphasis on students' grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension skills. However, CLT differs significantly. While GTM focuses on learning grammar rules and text translation, emphasizing the use of the mother tongue and vocabulary memorization, it often makes it difficult for learners to flexibly apply the learned language in practical communication. In contrast, CLT places greater emphasis on the practical application of language and the cultivation of communication skills. In CLT, the use of the mother tongue is restricted, and vocabulary and grammar mastery are achieved through application in actual contexts, thus more effectively improving learners' language proficiency and communication skills.

Secondly, the Direct Method emphasizes direct instruction in the target language, forgoing translation or native language explanations. While it aims to facilitate learners' comprehension through imitation and intuitive methods, it tends to prioritize language input and mimicry. Conversely, CLT underscores language production and communication, urging learners to apply the language in real-life contexts for holistic language proficiency enhancement.

Additionally, compared to the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, CLT has different teaching objectives. TPR teaches language through physical movements, making it particularly suitable for beginners and children. However, it focuses more on the initial stages of language learning and simple command acquisition. In contrast, CLT emphasizes advanced language application and the development of complex communication skills, enabling learners to master the art of appropriate language use in various contexts.

Lastly, when compared to the Audiolingual Method, CLT exhibits significant differences in teaching philosophy and practice. The Audiolingual Method cultivates oral listening and speaking skills through repeated sentence structure drills, emphasizing language accuracy and fluency. It relies heavily on repeated practice of dialogues and sentence patterns, emphasizing mechanical repetition and imitation to achieve language automation. However, communicative language teaching approach not only focuses on language accuracy but also on language appropriateness and practical functionality. It encourages learners to practice language in real or simulated real-life scenarios for comprehensive communication skill improvement. In terms of assessment, CLT also offers a more diversified approach, including the completion of practical communication tasks, for a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' language abilities.

In summary, Communicative Language Teaching, when compared to other mainstream teaching methods, possesses a unique teaching philosophy and practical advantages. It emphasizes the practical application of language and the cultivation of communication skills, encouraging learners to appropriately use language in different contexts for communication. Through comparative analysis, we can clearly see the important position and role of CLT in contemporary language teaching.

## 4.2. Application of CLT in Teaching

### 4.2.1. Roles of Teachers in Communicative Approach

The role of teachers has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from traditional knowledge transmitters to multi-faceted facilitators in students' learning journeys. Specifically, teachers serve not only as assistants and promoters, driving students' language learning through carefully designed communicative activities. Simultaneously, they play the role of process managers, controlling the classroom pace and ensuring effective participation and interaction from every student. Moreover, teachers function as analysts and advisors, conducting in-depth analyses of students' language usage and providing personalized guidance. According to Hedge's perspective, in a communicative classroom, teachers adopt various roles, including being the presenter and provider of a new language, managing the teaching procedure by designing classroom activities, arranging teaching materials, guiding students in group discussions, motivating contributions, evaluating performance, and satisfying the needs of the students (Hedge, 2002).

Another role assumed by several CLT approach is that of counselor, similar to the way this role is defined in Community Language Learning. In this role, the teacher - counselor is expected to exemplify an effective communicator seeking to maximize the meshing of speaker intention and hearer interpretation, through the use of paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback [6].

It is worth noting that the roles of teachers can vary depending on the strategies used in the classroom and the specific situation they encounter during the teaching process. In order to accomplish different tasks, teachers must adopt various teaching styles.

### 4.2.2. Roles of Students in Communicative Approach

For the traditional teaching approach, the students play the role of passive recipient of knowledge in class. However, communicative approaches in English teaching for the students them more active and independent in the learning process [7]. They are taught how to apply what they have learned to the real situation appropriately. They take part in the communicative activities in class to improve their communicative skills (Nunan 2001:76).

Firstly, students are the main protagonists of communicative activities. In the CLT teaching method, students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge, but rather become the "leading roles" who actively participate in and drive classroom activities. They are encouraged to actively engage in various language communication scenarios, enhancing their communication skills through practical language use.

Secondly, students assume the role of language practitioners in CLT. They need to reinforce their learned language knowledge through practical communication. In this process, students are required to fully leverage their subjective initiative, daring to experiment and make mistakes, learning and progressing through practice.

In addition, students are crucial participants in cooperation and interaction. Cooperation and interaction among students are essential in a CLT classroom. They need to hone their language communication skills through exchanges with peers, simultaneously improving their language proficiency based on feedback from classmates. This not only elevates students' language skills but also cultivates their teamwork spirit.

The communicative approach is student-centered, with the objective of making students responsible for their own language learning. Therefore, these roles can be applied to students of non-English majors, who can adopt different roles depending on the varying situations within the classroom.

### 4.2.3. Use of Teaching Material for Communication

For traditional teaching approach, teachers always try to exemplify the grammatical rule and vocabulary item. The traditional textbooks often provide students the information and

knowledge which are really boring and out of dated. They seldom give students first-hand information on how to apply what they learned about the language to the genuine communicative activities outside the classrooms. It is difficult for the students to understand the real language [8].

Advocates of the communicative approach argue that language teaching should incorporate "authentic" and "real-life" materials in the classroom. They believe that course materials should encompass communication that reflects the characteristics of real-life interactions. Materials emphasizing written language should incorporate practical activities, such as writing and reading. They contend that language learners should be exposed to a variety of contexts.

Materials that are naturally authentic can captivate the interest of language learners. They can spark learners' imaginations and greatly motivate them to learn the language. With authentic material, students become interested in learning the language and its practical applications. If given the opportunity to choose topics and types of authentic materials that interest them, their motivation will be significantly enhanced. These materials can assist students in applying what they learn to real-life situations.

## **5. Existed Problems and Pedagogical Implications**

### **5.1. Existed Problems**

Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has achieved certain results in China's current foreign language teaching, there are still the following deficiencies in English teaching in China, which require further research and improvement.

#### **5.1.1. Educational System and High-risk Assessments**

Although China's new curriculum reform has achieved certain results in quality education, the current educational system in China is still exam-oriented. High-risk assessments, such as the middle school entrance examination and the college entrance examination, have a decisive impact on students' language learning achievements. The existing evaluation system mainly focuses on assessing language knowledge rather than communication skills. This leads to limitations in the implementation of the CLT approach in practical teaching.

#### **5.1.2. The Insufficiency of Teaching Faculty**

Teachers are the guides of teaching activities, and the weakness of the teaching force is an important reason that hinders the widespread application of communicative teaching methods. On the one hand, most of the high-level and high-quality foreign language talents cultivated by various universities in China flow to developed areas after graduation, resulting in a polarized phenomenon of uneven talent distribution in China. On the other hand, although the CLT approach has been promoted in China for many years, relevant training for teachers is still insufficient. This leads to many teachers not having a deep enough understanding of the concept and implementation methods of CLT, making it difficult to effectively apply it in practical teaching.

#### **5.1.3. Large Class Sizes**

It is internationally recognized that the number of students in a class should be controlled between 35-40, and should not be too large. Otherwise, it may affect the communication and learning between teachers and students, making it difficult for every student to fully participate in classroom activities, hindering the development of students in various aspects, and also increasing the difficulty of maintaining classroom teaching management. Meanwhile, the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach emphasizes learning and using language in authentic communicative environments [9]. However, within the prevailing teaching landscape, offering students ample authentic communicative contexts and chances poses a challenge. Consequently, the effectiveness of employing the CLT methodology is constrained.

## 5.2. Pedagogical Implications

No teaching method is omnipotent. The communicative teaching method has its scope of application, and traditional teaching methods are not all undesirable. It is necessary to find a balance between the two, inherit and creatively develop the communicative teaching method, and work together to cultivate students' communicative ability and language skills, so that students can apply what they have learned.

### 5.2.1. Strengthen the Construction of the Teaching Team

To effectively implement the communicative teaching method, it is first necessary to enhance teacher training. On one hand, schools should attach importance to the cultivation and improvement of foreign language teachers' quality, actively organize lectures to ensure that teachers can fluently use foreign languages for communication. Simultaneously, it is essential to cultivate teachers' teaching skills. ELT teachers should have a thoroughly understanding of the principles of communicative language teaching, and have the responsibilities to facilitate the desired pedagogical approach and eventually learning [10]. On the other hand, attention should also be paid to the introduction of foreign teachers, allowing students to have more contact with foreign teachers, experience authentic foreign languages, and better correct students' problems in pronunciation, speech rate, and intonation.

### 5.2.2. Introducing Online Elements into Teaching

Nowadays, the traditional foreign language teaching has been unable to meet students' needs for foreign language learning. This requires foreign language teachers to reform their teaching methods and flexibly apply the method in the classroom, guiding students to effectively utilize the unlimited information resources provided by the internet for communicative learning. Due to the large class sizes commonly used in first-class English teaching, it is difficult to fully guarantee the quality of each student's listening. Teachers can create their own learning materials on the school's website, upload teaching materials for students to browse, so that students can watch and learn without restrictions of time and place after class. Teachers can also analyze and provide students with relevant learning websites, For example, students can engage in English communication and learning through websites like BBC or VOA, thereby achieving the goal of improving their English communication skills [10].

### 5.2.3. Conduct In-depth Research and Continuously Improve the Communicative Language Teaching Approach

The communicative language teaching approach, like other teaching methods, needs continuous innovative reform in practice to adapt to the progress and development of the times. Currently, research on the communicative language teaching in China mostly remains at the theoretical level, with limited practical research involved, and there is little innovative exploration of CLT, which restricts its development and innovation in China. Only through continuous innovation can the communicative language teaching approach play its maximum role in foreign language teaching, enhancing students' interest in foreign language learning, and ultimately improving their foreign language communication skills [11].

What's more, Under the reform background that the national goal of foreign language talent training is gradually shifting to cultivating students' foreign language communicative ability, it is necessary to strengthen the research on foreign language communicative teaching methods in primary and secondary schools [12].

## 6. Conclusion

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach does not conflict with other teaching theories; instead, it effectively integrates the strengths of various teaching methodologies, thus earning widespread endorsement in foreign language instruction. However, it's worth noting

that the theory of CLT is still undergoing continuous practical exploration and refinement. Looking ahead, with the deepening of globalization and cross-cultural exchanges, the significance of CLT will become even more prominent. CLT not only offers the potential for more personalized instruction tailored to individual student needs, but also presents opportunities for integration with emerging teaching theories and technologies, such as artificial intelligence. This integration promises to usher in a more efficient and personalized mode of foreign language teaching.

Undoubtedly, the introduction of CLT has significantly enriched China's foreign language teaching theory system, improved our students' foreign language communication skills, and made significant contributions to cultivating high-quality, high-level foreign language talents in our country. I strongly believe that CLT will continue to leverage its unique advantages to propel China's foreign language education to new heights.

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