

Effects of Communicative Language Teaching in Grammar Class

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Abstract

The Communicative Language Teaching approach was first put forward in the 1970s, reached its peak and was introduced into our country in the mid-eighties. In the previous researches, a lot of scholars explored its application in speaking, listening, reading and writing. But few researches focus on its application in grammar teaching in junior high school. Some researches also showed CLT is more effective than the traditional approaches in arousing students' interest, initiative in learning English and other aspects. Nowadays, people have realized the shortcomings of traditional grammar teaching methods that overemphasize language forms and mechanical exercises. Therefore, the traditional grammar teaching method should be reformed under the framework of CLT to combine the learning of language forms with the cultivation of students' ability. Through writing this paper, it aims to explore effects of CLT in teaching grammar.

Keywords

CLT; English Teaching; Teaching Implications.

1. Introduction

In the history of language teaching, certain methods such as Audio-lingual, Grammar Translation and Total Physical Response have come into view. All these methods have been widely and extensively discussed and evaluated by researchers and scholars. Each of them has their own focus, weak points as well as strong points and they are based on a theory. In other words, methods are developed based on theories such as behaviourism, structuralism, constructivism and universal grammar. Communicative Language Teaching is no exception with this regard. Nowadays, the CLT method, which is originated in Britain, is widely used in English as Second Language classrooms around the world. According to Barnaby and Sun (1989) and Ellis (1996), CLT is recognized as a powerful theoretical model in ELT by many linguists and language teachers or as a useful approach to language teaching. Through writing this paper, the author try to define Communicative Language Teaching approach, including its communicative activities and some important characteristics. The paper will also include explaining main advantages and disadvantages of CLT. Most importantly, the paper aims to explore its application in English language teaching, analyze existing problems and further provide some teaching suggestions. In this way, the paper can provide references for the further research theoretically and practically.

2. The Communicative Language Teaching Approach

2.1. Definition of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching is an approach to teaching language which is defined many writers[1]. According to Richards et al., in the dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defined CLT as "an approach to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence"[2]. Hymes further discussed five main components of communicative competence, like linguistic

competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency in the book *A Course in English Language Teaching*. Besides, other authors in the field have defined and characterized CLT in various ways. Littlewood explains that “one of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view”[3].

In general, as far as I’m concerned, CLT advocates go beyond teaching grammatical rules of the target language, and propose that, by using the target language in a meaningful way, learners will develop communicative competence. The communicative approach is concerned with the unique individual needs of each learner. By making the language relevant to the world rather than the classroom, learners can acquire the desired skills rapidly and agreeably.

2.2. The Communicative Activities

Based on previous researches and my experience, the author would like to discuss the use and functions of several common communicative activities.

1) Pair work

This activity can be used in answer checks, conversations, interviews, discussions, etc. In this activity, each participant has about 50% of a chance to speak, which enables them to express themselves clearly in an appropriate time slot.

2) Group work (Group Discussion)

Group discussion engages students in active thinking and also offers them an opportunity to air their viewpoints on related social issues. Care should be taken, however, on the topics chosen for group discussion. Topics uninteresting to the students or irrelevant to their daily life would make the group discussion activity lackluster or not fruitful enough.

3) Information gap

Information gap activities are those in which students are given different bits of information. By sharing this separate information, they can complete a task. In this activity, the learners are given different information and their job is to find the missing information from their partners.

4) Role-plays and simulations

The benefits of this kind of activities are that the students are interested in the task as it provides them an opportunity to demonstrate their creativity, that it improves their non-verbal communicative competence, and that the cooperative nature of the talk engages students in natural spontaneous communication.

2.3. Major Features of CLT

Through reading multiple literature, some major characteristics of CLT can be concluded from two aspects.

From the perspectives of the teacher, evaluation is carried out in terms of fluency and accuracy. A teacher may use formal evaluation. For instance, he/she is likely to use a communicative test, which is an integrative and has a real communicative function. Besides, Wang also refers the teacher is the facilitator of students' learning, manager of classroom activities, advisor during activities and a co-communicator engaged in the communicative activity along with the students[4]. In other words, it is the learner who plays a great role in a large proportion of the process of learning.

Concerning the views of students, their errors should be seen as a natural outcome of the development of the communication skills and can be tolerated. More emphasis should be given to active modes of learning such as pair or group work in problem solving tasks in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning.

2.4. Advantages and Disadvantages of CLT

2.4.1. Advantages of CLT

The implementation of CLT has brought a lot of advantages for Teaching English as a foreign/second language. Unlike audio lingual and grammar-translation methods, communicative teaching emphasizes on “task-oriented, student-centred” language teaching practice and it provides students with comprehensive use of English language and communicative opportunities (Richards, 2006). Through sorting some literature, here are some pros as follows:

Firstly, it motivates students to improve their ability of using English by themselves since it emphasizes on fluency in the target language. Meaning that, it provides students with assignments that allow them to improve their own ideas about what they are going to talk and how they are going to express. This enables the learners to be more confident when interacting with other people and they also enjoy talking more.

Secondly, CLT focuses on and aims at communicative competence. Thus, it brings the real life situation of the native English into classroom activities such as role-play and simulation.

Thirdly, The major portion of the learning process is not upon the teacher thus illustrating that CLT classes have moved from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness[5]. And the role of the teacher is just to facilitate the learning process.

2.4.2. Disadvantages of CLT

There have been various criticisms on the principles of the communicative approach to teaching and learning language:

First, the approach gives priority to meanings and rules of use rather than to grammar and rules of structure. In this way, it can cause there is a danger of focusing too much on oral skills and less emphasis is given to reading and writing skills.

Second, the CLT approach focuses on fluency but not accuracy in grammar and pronunciation. Besides, students with low levels of proficiency in the target language may find it difficult to participate in oral communicative activities.

Third, the monitoring ability of the teacher must be very good. This implies that much more effort is expected that every teacher should modify the syllabus to correspond with the needs of the learners.

Fourth, CLT is sometimes difficult to be implemented in an EFL classroom due to the lack of sources and equipment like authentic materials and native speaker teachers as well as large size of the classes.

3. The Application of CLT in Grammar Teaching

With the development of English teaching methods, CLT is also widely used in all kinds of English classroom, like speaking, grammar, reading and listening, etc. In this paper, I will conclude its existing problems in grammar teaching according to many researches, thus aiming to provide valuable teaching suggestions and research implications for teachers and researchers.

3.1. Existing Problems

Many scholars discussed grammar teaching have some problems in junior high school. The paper will further mention these problems as follows:

1) Lack proper understanding of grammar

Most teachers fail to correctly understand these mistakes made by students in the process of learning grammar. They usually attribute the mistakes to students' problems, such as absent-mindedness in class, lacking of practice and insufficient grammar rules. In the input hypothesis,

Krashen points out that emotional factors or psychological factors will affect the process of learners' input and absorption when they acquire language emotional factors including learners' self-confidence, learning motivation and anxiety level in learning. Therefore, when analyzing the causes of students' mistakes, teachers should consider external environmental factors. In addition, language acquisition should follow a fixed sequence and stages. For example, in learning the past, learners know that they should add "-ed" to the end of a verb to express something that has happened, but when they are unfamiliar with irregular verbs, they may use comed, goed, eated, etc. Only when students have learned these rules, they can use them correctly. Besides, students will make different mistakes in different stages, and teachers sometimes feel uneasy and do not know the reason. In fact, students will make mistakes when their cognition reaches a certain level with the development of learning. Then they finally know how to express themselves in appropriate scenes and time. Their experience is the process of grammar internalization. Thus, if teachers can correctly understand students' mistakes and treat them with patience, tolerance and encouragement, teachers will achieve the purpose of teaching.

2) Depend on textbook unduly

The relevant study found that many teachers use the textbook as the only guideline and gradually implement the teaching procedure according to the textbook[6]. Moreover, in order to complete the teaching task, some teachers only complete the teaching content. Of course, the textbook is a key clue in teaching and an important resource for teachers. But, there are many factors that affect students' cognition, such as different growing environments, different family education and the differences between different schools. It requires teachers to adjust teaching plans according to students' characteristics instead of following textbooks completely. Besides, teachers can collect resources from TV, Internet and newspapers in order to develop textbooks.

3) Less connection between grammar teaching and students' life

In grammar teaching, grammar used to be treated as many independent rules. Teaching grammar is teaching grammar rules that have less to do with students' real life, let alone creating situations to motivate students. Many teachers are used to giving grammar rules directly. In a demonstration lesson, the key point is some modal verbs, the teacher said today we will study some modal verbs. Everyone should take them seriously because they are the key point of the exam. However, why do students have to learn grammar? What is the connection between grammar and everyday life? Students know nothing about these questions, so they lack interest and motivation in learning grammar.

4) Only attach importance to form and structure

In English teaching, the teacher used to adopt the inductive and deductive method to teach the target language. They ignore students' involvement in this process. This may cause students memorize these grammar rules mechanically. And they cannot use them flexibly. Thus, if the teacher just focuses on teaching form and structure of grammar, students cannot master the target language.

In general, there are some common problems that we need to pay attention to:

1. The high requirements of teachers: In CLT, it emphasizes the teacher should play all kinds of roles, like guider, organizer, assessor and participant, etc. Besides, the teacher not only masters a wide range of teaching skills, classroom management skills, practical techniques and evaluation. Facing with these problems, it is difficult for them to implement communicative teaching activities because of systematical training and huge teaching stress.

2. The influence of test-oriented education: Examinations, to a large extent, dominate the students' fate. Students are busy dealing with the tests. Some students are confused with the aims of learning English and some are not clear what level is required. For many students, the higher the grades that they learn in, the lower their interest in English tends to become.

Teachers speak more in class while fewer student-centered activities are designed. As a result the classroom atmosphere is usually boring and dull.

3. The diversification of students' levels: Currently, our teaching is usually in a big size. Different students have different English proficiency levels. This can cause more difficulties in monitoring work and giving feedback, attending to all students during class time and assessing students' interests and moods, etc.

4. The high difficulty in reaching ideal teaching effects: There are a lot of other factors can influence teaching, such as teaching materials and environment, etc.

3.2. Effects of CLT in Grammar Teaching

Applying Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has proved effective for grammar teaching due to its merits on several aspects:

1) Application within communicative contexts: By focusing on learning grammar in real communication situations, students can apply what they've learned grammatically when communicating. This approach makes grammar learning more practical and efficient than conventional methods that merely ask students to memorize rules. For instance, when the teacher teaches the simple present tense, he can create a real situation to make students describe their school day by using 5W.

2) Enhanced interest and motivation: With group discussions, role plays, debates etc., interactive activities widely used under this method, it's easier for students to get involved in the learning process and thus their interests could be sparked. Compared with traditional education where teachers feed knowledge into students passively, such active involvement leads to better educational outcomes.

3) Development of comprehensive linguistic skills: Traditional grammar instruction tends only to focus on grammar itself while neglecting other related abilities like listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, CLT equips students with these competencies simultaneously since all four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—are practiced throughout the process of mastering grammar. For example, in CLT classroom, the teacher can design a game including the following elements: given task or goal; some rules; competition between participants and oral or written communication between participants.

4) Awareness of intercultural communication: As an important feature of human languages, culture always exists around us either implicitly or explicitly. In CLT classroom, we often discuss how cultural backgrounds influence our use of certain grammatical structures so as to foster sensitivity towards different cultures.

3.3. Teaching Implications

Faced with these problems and based on the previous research outcomes, some effective ways can be summarized to promote the application of Communicative Language Teaching.

1) Establish a new type of English teacher development system

Larsen-Freeman (1986) presented that "activities in the Communicative Approach are often carried out by students in small groups [7]. Small numbers of students interacting are favored in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning. Therefore, it is essential for the teachers to improve their communicative competence in English. Secondly, English teacher training programs should enable teachers to understand what roles they should play in the classroom underlying communicative language teaching and how they should fulfill it. Thirdly, a good EFL teacher training and development program must include full-scale training covering a wide range of teaching skills and techniques, such as basic classroom skills (presenting, eliciting, organizing practice, and correcting errors), practical techniques for developing listening, speaking, reading and writing, use of aids and materials (the blackboard, other visual aids, and flashcards), and skills of presentation and evaluation.

2) Set up Learner-centered English Classroom

Classroom is an important place to train students' communicative competence, so teachers should pay attention to helping students to set up self-confidence and make every teaching link become a course of communication. Besides, a learner-centered classroom is designed to enable the learner to make critical pedagogical decisions by systematically training them in the skills they need to make such decisions. Such a classroom is constituted with complementary aims. Therefore, students are systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. However, teachers should try their best to arouse student' enthusiasm of positive participation and let students dare to make a speech and feel glad to communicate. And it is important for teachers to create equal and harmonious teacher-student relationships and treat students equally. Thus, learner-centered classroom is quite important for the teaching efficiency.

3) Design communicative activities

Communicative activities refer to the activities which are organized in classes with elements of communicative needs, communicative function and students' improvisation. Firstly, these activities should include these standards. In the book *Second Language Teacher Education*, Richards and Nunan (1990: 31-32) describe the criteria as follows [8].

1. Communicative purpose: The activity must involve the students in performing a real communicative purpose rather than just practicing language for its own sake. In order for this to occur, there must be some kind of "gap" (information or opinion) that the students seek to bridge when they are communicating.

2. Communicative desire: The activity must create a desire to communicate in the students. That is, even though speaking is focused on the students, they must feel a real need to communicate.

3. Content, not form: When the students are doing the activity, they must be concentrating on what they are saying, not how they say it. They must have some "message" they want to communicate.

4. Variety of language: The activity must involve the students in using a variety of language forms, not just one specific language form. The students should feel free to improve, using whatever resources they have.

5. No teacher intervention: The activity must be designed to be done by the students working by themselves rather with the teacher. The activity should not involve the teacher correcting or evaluating how the students do the activity, although it could involve some evaluation of the final "product" of the activity when the activity is over. This assessment should be based on whether the students have achieved their communicative purpose, not whether the language they used was correct.

6. No material control: The activity should not be designed to control what language the students use. The choice about what language to use should rest with the students.

Secondly, good communicative activities can create a context which supports learning, provide at least a life-like environment in which natural learning may be possible. Besides, it can also enable the students to see more clearly what their ultimate objective of learning English is so as to improve their learning motivation.

Therefore, these communicative activities (role-play, group work, discussion, etc) can be a big contribution to achieving communicative competence.

4) Make clear of standards of evaluation in CLT

A good lesson should set up an evaluation standard. Through this way, the teacher can reflect on whether he have realize his teaching objectives and students have mastered some language knowledge and skills. Especially, in the process of communication, the teacher should consider

whether the class focuses on fluency or accuracy. Then, the teacher can choose proper communicative teaching activities. Finally, students can better improve their communicative competence.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the paper thoroughly explores the Communicative Language Teaching in English grammar teaching, mainly including its meanings, main features, communicative activities and its basic advantages and disadvantages. On this basis, the author further analyzes its existing problems in grammar class according to practical teaching and multiple researches on CLT. Moreover, some useful and effective teaching suggestions can be provided in this paper. The paper can also provide a research framework in the future theoretically and practically. And the analysis of CLT can lay a solid foundation for the research of TBLT so as to make up for its shortcomings.

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