Reflections on Communicative Language Teaching and Its Application in China*

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Abstract—**The emergence of English as a global language has imposed a profound influence on the methodology of foreign language teaching. Communicative Language Teaching, an influential approach in language teaching, came into being decades ago and later was introduced into China. Nowadays, it has become one of the most important approaches in the field of foreign language teaching worldwide. The present paper discussed the historical and theoretical background of Communicative Language Teaching and its two versions and its main characteristics. After having explored its application in China, directions for future improvement are pointed out.**

Index Terms—**communicative language teaching, historical and theoretical background, application**

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of foreign language teaching can be traced back to thousands of years ago along the course of the history of the communication between people speaking different languages. The past few decades alone have witnessed a whirlwind of transitions in foreign language teaching, especially in the field of English language teaching, from grammar translation to direct method, to audiolingualism, to cognitive code, and many other methods (T. Pica, 2000). Among them, Communicative Language Teaching has attracted much attention from the field of language pedagogy, and at the same time has triggered much debate as well (D. Woods & H. Cakir, 2011; R. Najjari, 2014; W. Littlewood, 2014). As has been pointed out by Sandra J. Savignon, (2007), in the field of second language teaching, Communicative Language Teaching has become a buzzword frequently mentioned, and the same is true of foreign language teaching. What is more, Communicative Language Teaching has attracted the attention from teachers and educationists of related field all over the world. According to Littlewood (2014), much has been argued about the question of whether the Communicative Language Teaching will come to the end of its life or whether it will continue to prosper in numerous fields of language teaching after approximately 40 years of development. In Littlewood's point of view, instead of only being "a label for a specific approach as an umbrella term to describe all approaches that aim to develop communicative competence in personally meaningful ways", Communicative Language Teaching also "provides a framework for defining issues that research and exploratory practice need to address" in the upcoming years in future (Littlewood, 2014). In addition, Littlewood holds that over the past few decades Communicative Language Teaching has helped teachers and researchers in related areas to tackle plenty of issues of value and brought in large quantities of opportunities, based on which we could step forward (ibid.). However, in Littlewood's opinion, it has also led to plenty of questions and dilemmas in the theoretical field and the practical realm" (ibid.).

II. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to Richards and Rodgers (1986, p.64), the Communicative Language Teaching could date back to the changes in the British language teaching tradition originating from the late 1960s. At that time, applied linguists in Britain began to call into question the theoretical assumptions underlying situational language teaching. As stated by Howatt (1984, p.280), the situational approach had come to the end of its life by the end of the 1960s. According to Howatt (ibid.), there would be no future in being obsessed with the fantasy of being able to predict language on the foundation of situational events. And he holds that English language teachers and researchers in related fields should attach importance to a closer examination of the language itself and they should shift their attention back to the traditional concept that holds that speeches carried meaning in themselves and conveyed the meanings and intentions of the speakers and writers who used them (1984, p. 280).

At that time, the European countries gradually became closely linked with and dependent on one another, so they

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were forced to teach adults the major languages of the European Common Market and the council of Europe as well (ibid.). Just as Savignon (2007) has argued, people could travel and exchange information and knowledge within the European Union at their own will, thus facilitating the need and the opportunity for language learning and intercultural comperhension. In addition, "mass travel for business and pleasure over continental motorway networks and air routes, electric media, mass movements of immigrant labor and at managerial level in multinational corporations, supranational economic, cultural and political institutions, interdependence of imports or exports in an increasingly unified market, all conspire to render hard national frontiers within the Council for Cultural Cooperation area increasingly obsolete. (J. L. M. Trim, 1979)"

Communicative Language Teaching derived from a theory of language which regards language as communication. The aim of language teaching is to develop "communicative competence", which has been named by Hymes (1972). He employs the name "communicative competence" to contrasts the notion of "competence" proposed by Chomsky. For Chomsky, "competence" is defined as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his knowledge of the 'ideal speaker-listener', operating within 'a completely homogeneous speech community'." It distinguishes itself from "performance" which is seen as "the actual use of language in concrete situations", and will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course, and so on"(ibid.). Thus, performance is "an incomplete and a degenerate reflection of the ideal speaker-listener's competence, and as such is considered to be of little relevance to the theoretical and descriptive linguist (ibid.). Hymes criticizes Chomskyan linguistics with its narrow concept to view competence as a 'Garden of Eden view', for it dismisses central functions of use by relegating them to the area of performance. He argues that Chomsky restricted the notion of competence to the scope of perfect knowledge, and Chomsky ignored the related and complicated sociocultural factors, which could only exist in the field of theory, in the ideal world of linguists. He further points out that Chomsky's competence was a kind of grammatical competence, an ideal sort of power human beings endowed at birth, and compared Chomsky' notion of performance to an emergency pushing the perfect language-user out into a fallen world (ibid.).

Different from the "competence" proposed by Chomsky, "communicative competence", according to Hymes, means "the knowledge both of rules of grammar, vocabulary and semantics, and rules of speaking---the patterns of sociolinguistic behavior of the speech community" (Jack C. Richards, 1998, p.145). Hymes holds that communicative competence is what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. According to Hymes, there are four sectors of communicative competence (1972, p.281):

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

What is more, Savigon employs this term to describe the capability of language learners to communicate with other speakers, and this ability to give and take meaning was discriminated from their capability of merely recite dialogues or their perform on discrete-point grammatical tests (Savigon, 2007). In 1980, Canale and Swain further develop the theory of "communicative competence". The four components of communicative competence classified by them are: grammar competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence (cited in Wei, 2004).

In addition, Halliday's language theory also contributes much to the linguistic foundation of Communicative Language Teaching. He defines language as "meaning potential", that is, as sets of options, or alternatives, in meaning, that are available to speaker-hearer. "At each of the levels that make up the linguistic coding system, we can identify sets of options representing what the speaker 'can do' at that level. When it comes to grammar, or to other domain of linguistics, each of these can be looked upon as a series of strategies, together with the tactics of structure formation (Halliday, 1973). In Halliday's opinion, linguistics is concerned with the description of speech acts or texts, so the factual usage of language should be paid attention to, including all the functions of language, and all components of meaning as well (Halliday, 1970, p.145). And later he describes seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their first language (Halliday, 1975, p.11-17):

1. The instrumental function: using language to get things;
2. The regulatory function: using language to control the behavior of others;
3. The interactional function: using language to create interaction with others;
4. The personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings;
5. The heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover;
6. The imaginative function: using language to create a world of the imagination;
7. The representational function: using language to communicate information.

His concept of the basic functions of language and other language theory is linked with the theory of Hymes in that both of them relate language to extra-linguistic phenomena. All of these provide theoretical foundations for Communicative Language Teaching.

According to what has been summarized by Richards and Rodgers (1986, p.71), Communicative Language Teaching holds the following communicative view of language.

1. Language is a system of for the expression of meaning.

2. The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.

3. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.

4. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

As for the learning theory of Communicative Language Teaching, little has been written about that. Richards and Rodgers (1986, p.72) describe the three principles of learning theory as follows:

1. Communicative principle: Activities that involve real communication promote learning;

2. Task principle: Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning;

3. Meaningfulness principle: Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

III. TWO VERSIONS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Communicative Language Teaching consists of a strong version and a weak version. The strong version of Communicative Language Teaching holds the opinion that Communicative Language Teaching is not only a question of activating a kind of inert knowledge that has already existed in language learners, but at the same time it is a problem of fostering the growth and development of language itself from the perspective of language learners. The weak version attaches great value to supplying learners with abundant chances to use their English to communicate with other learners in authentic context (Rao, 2002).

Howatt (1984, p.279) describes the former as "using English to learn it" and the latter as "learning to use English". He holds that the weak version which has become somewhat standardized practice in the past few years, and the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and characteristically has been stressed, and additionally, teachers and researchers have intended to develop such activities into programs of language teaching in a wider scope (Howatt, 1984, p.279). The 'strong' version of communicative teaching, on the contrary, proposes the view that language is learned and gained in the process of language communication, and therefore, "it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the knowledge, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself" (ibid.).

According to Larsen-Freeman (1986, p.132), the most prominent feature of Communicative Language Teaching is that as long as we are doing something, we are doing it with the agenda of communication. W. Littlewood (2000, p.86) classified the communicative activities into two categories: pre-communicative activities and communicative activities. The purpose of pre-communicative activities is to grant the learners control of fluency over linguistic form, and the standard of success or failure is whether the learner produces acceptable language. On the contrary, in he process of communicative activities, the use of linguistic forms is secondary compared with the communication of meaning. It is expected that the learner should enhance his skill starting from an intended meaning, choosing suitable language forms from his total repertoire, and producing them fluently (ibid.). The criterion for success is whether the meaning is conveyed effectively (ibid.)". He also pointed out four contributions of communicative activities to language learning, that is, providing 'whole-task practice'; improving motivation; allowing natural learning; creating a context which supports learning (ibid.). In order to give students an opportunity to practice communicating meaningfully in different contexts and different roles, various communicative activities could be introduced, such as games, role plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks.

The second characteristic of Communicative Language Teaching is that "activities in the Communicative Approach are often carried out by students in small groups" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.132). By way of small group activities, students could interact with each other in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning.

The third characteristic of Communicative Language Teaching is its "learner-centered and experience-based view of second language teaching" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.69). In Communicative Language Teaching, classroom performance should not be dominated exclusively by the teacher, but by both the teacher and students. As for the role of the teacher, he or she should not be the dominant authority in the classroom, but should do necessary things and organize activities to facilitate the communicative process in the classroom while making sure that students feel secure, unthreatened and non-defensive (Rao, 2002). According to Breen and Candlin (1980, p.99), the teacher has two roles: firstly, they should foster the communication and connection among all students in the classroom and provide various activities and texts; and the second role for them is to play the role of an independent participant within the communication-in-classroom group (ibid.). They further point out that the two main roles imply a set of secondary roles for the teacher: first, the teacher should be an organizer of resources and as a resource himself; second, the teacher should be a guide in the process of classroom activities, and the third role is the role as a researcher and learner, rich in in terms of appropriate knowledge to contribute, experienced in the nature of learning and organizational capacities (ibid.). What's more, Richards and Rodgers (1986, p.78) add other roles assumed for the teacher, such as the analyst of learner language needs, the counselor, the group process manager.

On the other hand, students in Communicative Language Teaching are no longer regarded as passive recipients, but as active participants in communication activities. Breen and Candlin (1980, p.110) define the learner's role within Communicative Language Teaching as follows: the learner assumes the role of negotiating between the self and with other learners in the process of classroom activities which he takes part in.

IV. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING'S IMPLEMENTATION IN CHINA

Rao (2002) pointed out that, after realizing the fact that the traditional grammar-translation method and audiolingual method are far from being capable of developing learners' communicative competence, English language teachers and researchers in China started introducing Communicative Language Teaching into the English teaching in both junior and senior high schools, colleges and universities in the early 1980s. From the very beginning of learning the English language, students are encouraged to develop communicative competence "by means of meaningful drills and communication activities" (ibid.).

However, the outcome of teaching English exclusively using Communicative Language Teaching did not show the expected result. Although Communicative Language Teaching has gradually been introduced into the Chinese EFL classrooms as early as in the 1980s, we could not see its presence in most of English language teaching classrooms in China (ibid.). Rao pointed out that for on the one hand, the students preferred the traditional classroom work and had a negative attitude towards the communicative-type activities; and on the other hand, the teachers felt frustrated with Communicative Language Teaching, both due to students' negative response and due to their lack of training in using Communicative Language Teaching and low English proficiency (ibid.).

Generally speaking, many factors may contribute to this phenomenon. The first reason might be what has been pointed out by Littlewood (2000, p.39), "the situation in which learners are asked to perform sometimes bear little outward resemblance to those which they will encounter outside the classroom… partly as a result of this lack of similarity with real-life situations, the learner's social rule is unclear and generally irrelevant to the purely functional purpose of the interaction." As for the solution to this problem, Littlewood proposed that the range of communicative activities should be extended in order to help learners "experience a wider range of communicative needs in situations more similar to those outside the classroom and under the influence of more varied and clearly defined social conditions" (ibid.).

The second reason might be the students' misconception of Communicative Language Teaching. Students in China more often than not hold the opinion that Communicative Language Teaching does not guarantee them sufficient grammar knowledge, and this is in contrast with their goal of learning English, that is, to pass all kinds of standardized grammar-based examinations (Li, 1984). As a consequence, it is the responsibility of the foreign language teacher to make the students aware that grammar is merely a tool or resource that could be used in the use of language instead of treating it an aim or end in itself. What is more, just as has been pointed out by David Nunan (1988, p.95), the teacher could start with organizing traditional learning activities and gradually attempts to introduce more communicative activities with the growth of acceptance from the perspective of the learners. In a word, the students should be made to fully understand the features of Communicative Language Teaching to avoid their misconceptions of Communicative Language Teaching.

The third reason might be that the students cannot balance the relationship between linguistic competence and communicative competence. It is very important that either of them should not be biased towards or against, and instead the two should be combined and interpreted. From the perspective of foundation, linguistic competence refers to correct, spontaneous and flexible use of the language system, and communicative competence is concerned with rule of using various strategies to use the language appropriately and readily by the learners, including tactics to tackle problems in communication. Linguistic competence is the basic foundation of communicative competence. Without the foundation of linguistic competence, there is no communicative competence to t. But the students should be made aware that communicative competence does not derive from linguistic competence automatically. Consequently, the students should actively participate in various communicative classroom activities such as debating, role playing, simulations and true-to-life interaction with the intention to develop communicative competence.

The final reason might be that the lack of materials available to some Chinese students in EFL (English as a Foreign Langue) situation prevent them from getting exposed to the authentic English language. However, up to date, with the development of modern science and technology, this problem has been solved in many parts of China's developed cities and areas, where most students have access to the Internet conveniently. As is commonly known that the Internet is a good resource of authentic materials for English learning, through which students could watch original English movies and TV series whenever they want and they could make friends with people from the English-speaking countries and even chat online with them. What is more, exchange study programs are common in universities and overseas students are commonly seen on campus. As a result, students could make friends and chat with foreign students face to face. In addition, students in the underdeveloped areas to whom the Internet is not available can learn English by listening to the radio, watching TV, or reading English novels and magazines.

Up to now, much has been achieved by the English Language teachers, educationists and researchers of various levels from relative fields. The past few years have witnessed in China large quantities of experiments and researches conducted commonly known as tasked-based language teaching, problem-based language teaching, project-based language teaching, cooperative language learning, computer-assisted language learning etc., most of which were viewed as the development within the Communicative Language Teaching (W. Littlewood, 2014). For instance, Qin & Dai (2013) has proposed a the ecological task-based teaching model informed by sociocultural theories after exploring the general practice of lack of attention to the sociocultural context and holism of language learning process in the field of the English language teaching. In another experiment in a vocational college, He (2013) applies task-based language

teaching in English teaching and compares it with the traditional PPP approach. By means of comparison of the results and analysis of the questionnaires between the experimental class and controlled class, He draws the conclusion and proves that task-based language teaching appears to be more facilitative than the PPP approach in arousing students' interest and improving students' academic records, thus to promote students' autonomous leaning ability. Furthermore, Yan (2012) employed task-based model in giving lectures on thesis writing for students who learn English as a second major and found that the tasked-based thesis writing course turned out to be more effective. In addition, there have been studies related to the teaching of translation, listening and speaking, language theories, advanced English based on the task-based or the project-based approach (Fu & Li, 2012; Ouyang Xudong, 2012; Zhang Feng, 2012; Zhang Mingfang, 2012).

V. Conclusion

The past few decades witnessed the development and prosperity of Communicative Language Teaching in China and in the whole world. After the review of the historical background as well as the theoretical background of Communicative Language Teaching, the application of Communicative Language Teaching in China is discussed. Up to now, with the changes in the subjects of language teaching and the overall environment in the society (Huang & Xia, 2013), great numbers of studies related to communicative language teaching have been witnessed in China and other countries, for example, numerous schools and educators have been experimenting tasked-based language teaching, problem-based language teaching, project-based language teaching, computer-assisted language learning etc. (A. Hadadi et al., 2014; D. Woods & H. Cakir, 2011; Qin & Dai, 2013; R. Najjari, 2014). We are sure that with the joint efforts domestic and abroad, the English language could be learned more efficiently all over China and all over the world.

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