

# An Analysis of Discourses in CLT from Sociocultural Theory Perspective

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**Abstract**—Theoretically, CLT (communicative language teaching) aims to develop language learners' communicative competence with “whole-task practice, motivation improving, natural learning and learning supporting”. But the real application of CLT still has weaknesses. This paper makes a study of classroom discourse from sociocultural theory perspective, and focus on teachers' talk, which is an important way in mediating learners' cognitive process. Discourse of reading and language structure teaching are discussed, and teachers' evaluation remarks are also included. The study points out that in CLT, more attention should be paid to the cognitive aspect of the leaning process rather than simple forms of class activities and interactions.

**Index Terms**—CLT, sociocultural theory, discourse, mediation, classroom

## I. INTRODUCTION

Communicative language teaching (CLT) emerged in 1970 with the theoretical basis that language is used to communicated with each other. The characteristics of CLT are that all activities of language study are interactive in nature with meaning conveyed from one party to another. CLT approach emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of language teaching. In China, CLT has been popular since 1990's for it has many merits compared with the traditional grammar-translation method. But in recent years, several studies (Zhang, 2006; Hu, 2010) were made pointing out the weaknesses of CLT in Chinese teaching context. Inspired by those studies and based on the author's class observation, this paper also makes a study on the effectiveness of CLT from sociocultural perspective.

Sociocultural theory, which originated from Russian linguist Vygotsky, or alternatively known as “cultural-historical theory” (Wertsch, 1985), emphasizes the importance of social-cultural factors in second language(SL) leaning. Sociocultural theory focuses on the cognitive process of language learning, with symbolic mediation playing an important role.

Sociocultural research is not a unified field, but those within it treat communication, thinking and learning as relate processes which are shaped by culture. The nature of human activity is that knowledge is shared and people jointly construct understanding of shared experiences.

A sociocultural perspective emphasizes the possibility that educational success and failure may be explained by the quality of educational dialogue (discourse is another term used by many linguists), which is not simply decided by the capability of individual students or the skill of their teachers. Sociocultural approach to SL learning and development is a particularly robust theory, as it focuses on the relation between an individual's development and the contexts of development, of which the individual student has been a part (Pacheco & Gutierrez, 2009). In recent years, several researches have been made to investigate language learning in sociocultural theory. For example, a researcher from New Zealand reviewed the meditational role of teachers' language in sociocultural theory and cited an excerpt between a teacher and several students to illustrate how scaffolding, teacher student interaction, and student-student interaction operates as assisted performance in language learning (Sun & Liu, 2009). Dawes. L. published a book titled “Creating a Speaking and Listening Classroom”, in which he studied how teachers use language as a media to provide students with strategies and resources in order to help them learn in a more efficient way. In China, there are less researches focusing on English-teaching classroom discourse. Sun and Liu (2009) used a case study to illustrate how instructional language functions as a meditation, which was a typical study with qualitative and quantitative data supporting the findings. This paper, based on the theory and findings of overseas and domestic research, tries to investigate classroom discourse in CLT from the sociocultural perspective.

## II. THE DEFECTS OF CLT IN CLASSROOM TEACHING

Since CLT emphasizes the interaction between teachers and students, there are more group work, pair work and questions and answers and evaluations. From appearance, the mode of class switches from “teacher-centered” to “student-centered” for there are more opportunities for students to talk compared with the traditional teaching methods, such as grammar translation approach. But we cannot ignore the fact that in China, English is learned as a foreign language rather than a second language, which means students have very little chance to get access to real English-speaking environment except involving in activities in class.

Hymes's "communicative competence" is a central idea in CLT, which stands in sharp contrast at the time with Noam Chomsky's influential use of the term "linguistic competence". Hymes was highly critical of a theory that explicitly set out to ignore the impact of social context on how language is used (Hymes, 1974). Communicative language teaching theory caters to the training of this competence in that it regards "interaction" as the main form of classroom teaching. CLT regards language neither as knowledge nor contents of classroom teaching, but as a means to send and receive information. CLT advocates "task-based" teaching method in which daily and idiomatic language can be used to solve practical problems. As a result, CLT has been very popular in English classroom in our country.

What is neglected is that the appropriateness of language use relies on cross-cultural insights which need to be handled delicately even by native speakers. It cannot be taught within several hundreds of teaching hours in a classroom. (Bao, 2004).

The study of psychological linguists showed that in daily life people tend to acquire chunks of language that can be memorized by language speakers. The chunks can be used directly in verbal communication without being constructed at the moment, which greatly facilitated the communication process. Most expressions used in daily conversation stand in the speaker's memory. According to this theory, since the design of activities in CLT aims to practice the structure and vocabulary in daily use, the strategies to conduct a conversation in a new context are not effectively involved. Once there emerges new elements in a situation, the learner will feel vulnerable to handle the tasks and conduct "appropriate" conversations.

What is more important is that in CLT, learners can only get access to the "concrete" culture or culture in a narrow sense, such as using polite terms, or specific expression related to the context or task. Culture in a broad sense, as well as insights of cross-cultural differences, which seem to have nothing to do with classroom activities, are often not included in the teaching process. In this sense, Gui shichun criticized CLT is too superficial in language and culture learning.

### III. CLT DISCOURSES FROM SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

A sociocultural approach assumes that individual development disposition must be understood in cultural and historical contexts, which are always embedded in social-political relations and struggles. A sociocultural perspective emphasizes that participation in cultural practices with others has consequences for individuals' learning and development. In other words, how students participate and engage in meaning-making activities depends largely on how teacher socially and culturally organize those activities. Discourse patterns reflects the overwhelming character of classroom talk wherein a teacher initiate (I) a question, and a student or students respond (R), and the teacher evaluates (E) the response with an utterance such as "good!" (Mehan, 1979). The following discussion is about discourses in CLT from sociocultural perspective.

#### A. *Discourses Used in Reading Comprehension*

Classroom examples best illustrate the how learners get the meaning of words, how talk, social interaction, roles, and the use of cultural tools affect the kind of knowledge that is acquired. Here is an example from Pacheco and Gurierrez.

Excerpt 1 (T= teacher, S= student)

(1) T: Stop right there. So she found them in a trunk in the attic. Okay, that's two words that we need to discuss right there. Trunk and attic. Now, trunk. A trunk is part of a car. But is a car in the attic?

(2) T: Now what do you think trunk is? [pause] Now, remember, what did she find? They found—she found bracelets and earrings in the trunk? What could it be?

(3) S1: Uhhh...

(4) S2: Oooh! [waving his right hand]

(5) T: What would you put bracelets and earrings in?

(6) S4: a box.

(7) S2: In a box?

(8) T: In a box! A trunk is like a –

(9) Ss: Box.

(10) T: A BIG box. Sometimes they're like this big [leans over to show width of a big box] and you open'em up like this [motion the opening of treasure chest lid]. It's like a treasure chest.

(11) T: There's a—oh! How many of your parents have like a big suitcase? That's like a big box? And something you open it up and it looks like a treasure chest or like—a trunk. A trunk is a what? A big box where you put things. Do any of your families have a trunk? Any big trunks?

(12) T: Yeah. And they're pretty heavy to carry.

(13) Ss: Yeah.

(14) S3: Yep.

(Pacheco and Gurierrez, 2009)

In this excerpt, the meaning of "trunk" was discussed between the teacher and the students rather than being given by the teacher. This is supposed to be a merit in CLT for in the older Grammar-translation teaching approach, the meaning of a word would be explained by the teaching without any students' participation. The charm of CLT lays in the

interaction between the teacher and the student with the student involved in more classroom activities. But when we look closely, we can nevertheless find that the form of teacher-student talk was not like that in authentic conversation. In all the 14 turns of the above conversation, the teacher took 8 of them, which reflects an uneven distribution of turn-taking of the two parties. Because the teacher has more “power” in classroom, she or he can take advantage of the power and be more dominant. In authentic conversation, turns usually are more equally shared by the two parties involved.

Despite the unequally distributed turns, it is very clear that the teacher spoke much more than the students in contents. The teacher did most of the talking, using a variety of words and expressions, while the students’ responses were only very short and very simple ones, such as “Yeah” or one word just to indicate they were listening. Seedhouse (1999) also pointed out that learners always took the language form as a means to complete a task, most expressions they used in classroom were easy, simple sentences, which had little positive effect on language learning.

The discussion above is only about the structure of the conversation in classroom. Here is what is deeper in the whole-group reading discussion: the teacher and the classroom discourse ostensible oriented towards vocabulary rather than sense making, that is, the opportunity for reading as interpretation of the world gave way to vocabulary building and the understanding of text meaning. The whole discussion was formed on an I-R-E discourse pattern, via which the discussion was oriented to next-step learning strategy. The teacher was strategic about building on her students’ expanding lexicons, drawing on the text as a resource for obtaining the correct answers to her questions.

From a sociocultural perspective, the teacher did employ a variety of tools (i.e. talk, cultural knowledge, gestures, comparisons, and text) to help building the learners’ lexicon, for the meaning of key words were central to the understanding of the material they were reading. Nevertheless, the whole activity was oriented to vocabulary building, even though a great effort was made to discuss those key words. It is obvious that the focus of the classroom activities was neither based on learners’ meaning making of the story, nor was initiated by it. It was the teacher who brought up the topic “what is a trunk?”, even the word “trunk” was not a problem in understanding the meaning of the whole material.

CLT claims that the teacher is not the only one who controls the class, with all participants having a say in classroom activities. The teacher no longer has a superior position, whose main task is to facilitate the conduction of various interactions in classroom (Hu, 2010). Still we can see that this goal is difficult to realize in real classroom teaching, since the teaching has the priority to decide which to talk about according to his/her perception of what is a problem in the sense-making process.

From the above discussion we can see that in teaching of reading, although the organization of class takes the form of “communicative” and the teacher really did a very good job in initiating questions to help the learners to build their vocabulary, the students are not likely to be encouraged to draw on language and literacy they develop through their participation across cultural communicates to develop the meaning making and critical thinking we value as what the learners should be taught.

#### B. *Discourse Used in Teaching Language Forms*

Forms of language, which are narrowly represented by grammar, is a very important part in beginners’ learning of a language. In recent years, grammar-translation teaching method has been criticized and abandoned for being teacher-centered and its mechanical drills. In CLT, the teaching of language forms is supposed to be conducted in interactions between teachers and students with students highly involved in well-designed activities.

The following example is from a seven-grade English class in a county in Shandong province. The whole class was videotaped by the author. The teacher is evaluated as an excellent teacher with good teaching skills, who claimed the method she used is “communicative teaching method” when she taught the grammar to express “time”, such as “it’s ~ o’clock”. Here are the script of classroom activities and interactions between the teacher and the students.

Excerpt 2 (T=teacher, S=student)

T: You usually get up—

S1: I usually get up at five [pause] o’clock.

T: At five—

Ss: O’clock

T: At five o’clock. We learned it yesterday, “Five” should be followed by –

Ss: O’clock

T: What time do you usually get dressed?

S2: I usually get dressed at five ten.

T: This is one way to say 5:10, and what is the other way?

S3: Ten past five.

With single student answering the question or the students answering the question together, the class did seem very “active” and “communicative”. But when we look at the conversation closely, there might reveal a different picture. Bakhtin (1986) held the view that teachers promote learners language learning by using mediational language as linguistic interaction, in which learners learn through incorporating the language of others or responding to others reactions. According to sociocultural theory, what the teacher say in a class, such as the way that the teacher composes a

question or the way they make an evaluation, is of vital importance to the construction of the student's knowledge. The discourse in classroom mediates the acquisition of sentence structure.

From the script, we can see that the teacher paid much attention to the form of "it's ~ o'clock", with special emphasis on "o'clock" following the number. The teacher designed two initiative-response rounds to rehearse the word "o'clock", with very obvious purpose orienting to the form of this expression. As a result, the students, who were in the seventh grade without much experience in an authentic communication context, would cognitively be busy distinguishing the correctness or incorrectness of the form rather than take it as a means to express their own idea or give information. What's more, the student's answer was not based on their own experience, although they did get up at a certain time every morning. The teacher left very little chance for the student to use this expression to describe their real life, and forms of grammar takes the priority. This kind of teaching is likely to make the student regard language as something printed on the textbook, just like mathematics and chemistry.

The emphasis on language forms can also be seen from the last question. Instead of giving an evaluation to S2, the teacher continued to ask another question "what is the other way (to say 5:10)?", although S2 answered the question correctly.

Of course language forms like plurality need to be practiced in the teaching process. But such a rigid form does undermine students' potential to use it as "real language". They were too worried about if they were saying the correct form rather than expressing the appropriate meaning. And in this case, we need to point out that "o'clock" is not an indispensable word in this situation: it is quite correct to say "I get up at five". Here we did not make a thorough investigation why the teacher emphasized the use of "o'clock", but whatever the teacher highlighted in his or her discourse will mediate the student's cognition in language learning.

So there are two aspects of this excerpt. One is the teacher's discourse is efficient in involving the students in class activities so they have the chance to practice a structure orally. On the other hand, the discourses between the teacher and students in the classroom do not have a positive effect on students' communicative competence. In the application of CLT, it is unlikely that all the predicted and assumed effects can be achieved.

### C. *The Teacher's Evaluation*

As is mentioned above, discourse patterns mostly take the form of "I-R-E". A comparative study (Hu and Guo, 2007) showed that Chinese teachers used less positive evaluations than that in foreign teachers' classroom. The use of particular evaluation in discourse reflects teachers' attitude, which in turn incurs a consequent attitude from the student. Chinese teachers give less positive evaluation or very general evaluation such as "good" or "ok", the reason of which can be traced to the culture of we Chinese people that being modest and respectful is supposed to be traits of good students. From the excerpt 2, we can see although the teacher initiate several questions and the students successfully answered these questions, she did not give any positive evaluation, instead, she expanded the previous question for more opportunities to rehearse the structure. In western culture, questions and any contribution to classroom activities are valued as active participation in classroom activities. Evaluations such as "This is a good question" and "excellent" are quite popular in American classrooms.

Sociocultural theory focuses on mediation in the process of language learning, and in China, the lack of English context out of school makes discourse in classroom especial important, for the student's motivation, affection, and cognitive process will be greatly influenced by the language used in the classroom. As young people, students are all very self-conscious, so the lack of positive evaluation will weaken their motivation and confidence in language learning.

Since CLT features more interactions between the teacher and the student, when students participate activities, they are also likely to be hurt emotionally. In the traditional "teacher-centered" classroom, students were given very little chance to speak, as a result, they felt "more secure" and less anxious. In CLT, the students need to use English frequently before their peers, so those students whose English are not very fluent will feel more anxious. The lack of immediate and specific evaluation makes the students less motivated, disappointed and more anxious.

In CLT, the teacher should be more positive towards students' performances. The frequent use of sincere and supporting evaluation will provide a more secure and encouraging environment for language learning, in which students will be appreciated by the teacher. Evaluation, as a kind of mediation, will not only develop the learner's language performance, but also increase their self-esteem.

## IV. THE DESIGN OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE FROM SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

From a sociocultural perspective, in second language and foreign language learning, social interaction is regarded as an integral process in language learning, and human cognition is formed through social activity. According to this view, learning an second or foreign language is understood as a semiotic process attributable to participation in social activities rather than internal mental processes solely by the individual (Block, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne 2006).

Language is a tool between teaching and learning and teacher's language mediating the construction of individual's knowledge (Mercer 2005). In English classes, teachers should be conscious of how language is processed cognitively. What kind of question can relate students' social experience (background knowledge, "schema" is another word used by many researchers) to new knowledge?

Since CLT is widely used in different levels of language teaching, some teachers interpret “communicative” as more classroom activities and “learner-centered” as providing more opportunities for the student to speak. They seldom take the cognitive factor into consideration, and the discourses they use in class are far from learners’ experience in society. The design of classroom discourse is a complex field to study, and from sociocultural theory we know teachers’ question should facilitate students’ cognitive development, using context cues or logical deduction to mediate students’ ability to arrive at the correct mastery of knowledge. In some cases, for example, reading fluency can be undermined through skills-based practices (Pacheco & Gutierrez, 2009). A lot of work needs to be done in the design of classroom activity design and discourse design.

## V. CONCLUSION

The above classroom examples illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical approach for reexamining how context—the organization of talk, classroom discourse, space, texts, ideas for example—affects the development of students’ learning process. Teachers can employ effective discourse to liven up the classroom atmosphere and provide more opportunities for students to involve themselves in classroom activities, but still have limitation on meaning making, which we value across academic contexts, and the real communicative competence in authentic environment rather than fixed language form.

There are still a lot to be done in this field. Researches can be carried out in classrooms of different subjects, such as Chinese, mathematics to see if there are different discourse patterns because of the nature of learning subjects. A great amount of videoed data is needed to support the research in this field. In addition, whether students’ age or gender influences the discourse pattern is still unknown.

Future research can also focus on how students learn online with the assistance of teachers in a virtual context rather than a face-to-face setting. From a sociocultural perspective, whether there is any implication of the relation between language and thought to learners’ thinking ability development and to collaborative learning in foreign language teaching is of great research significance. The study of this field needs the contribution from pedagogical, psychological, linguistic and other related fields. Anyhow, the range of questions to be explored is immense, and both teachers and researchers should take them into account.

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