

Learning to Speak in the Real-Life Situations First and Written Forms Afterwards: A Proposal Based on Communicative Language Teaching for English Learning & Teaching Reform in China

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Abstract

This article briefly introduces the popular Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology first and then discusses a possible remedy—a new English teaching method called “Learning to Speak in the Real-life Situations First, and Written Forms Afterwards”, which should be considered as the first step or the front-end of CLT; As it is the nature’s way of building a language foundation. This proposed method can be an effective way to solve the long-existing and unresolved problem, namely lack of communicative ability and the spoken proficiency in English among English learners in China. Finally, keeping abreast with the times, the essay gives an outlook in second language acquisition (SLA) in the future.

Keywords: English teaching & learning reform, communicative language teaching (CLT), communicative competence, second language acquisition (SLA), speaking first, written forms afterwards

1. Introduction

With the on-going reform in secondary English education and the possible elimination of Gaokao (The National College and University Entrance Examination) in China, much more emphasis on communicative competence and speaking proficiency in English training is an irreversible trend. As a result, in order to adjust to this impending English educational reform, English teachers must pay attention to improving students’ oral presentation abilities in order to cultivate their communicative competence and speaking proficiency in native English. This may be viewed as a turning point for English education regarding SLA as a goal in China.

2. An Overview of CLT

Communicative language teaching (CLT), or the Communicative Approach, (the term notional-functional approach and functional approach are sometimes used) (Richards & Rodgers, 2008, pp. 154-155) is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of study. As Richards and Rodgers (2008) put it, CLT is a language teaching approach characterized by a set of theories and beliefs about the nature of language, which is its core value in learning a language. In addition, it comprises a set of principles for teaching a language. Its origin can be traced back to the early 1970s in England, where its theoretical foundation is set up by a group of applied linguists such as Wilkins, Widdowson, Candlin, Brumfit, Jonson etc. and its principal focus is on communication in L2 teaching. Based on its original concepts, CLT’s fundamental goal is to develop learners’ communicative ability in L2 through communication and interaction with others (Brown, 2006; Canale & Swain, 1980). And in the middle of 1970s, with the rapid proliferation of CLT in the United States and other European countries, CLT has been seen as an approach (and not a method) that aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and develop procedures for the teaching of 4 language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. (Richards & Rodgers, 2008, p. 155) As a consequence, since its emergence CLT has rapidly gained a widespread acceptance in the field of SLA. Being endorsed as a revolutionary reaction against the traditional language teaching, CLT has produced a great influence on language teaching practice in both ESL and EFL environments. (Feng, 2013)

CLT is a language teaching approach which is usually represented by a clear-cut defined set of guidelines to teaching practices, rather than as a teaching method. Among the most recognized lists is the list of general

principles or specifically 5 features of CLT put forth by David Nunan (1991) as follows:

- 1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- 2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- 3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- 4) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- 5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

As the 5 principals illustrate, CLT basically advocate the use of genuine teaching materials in the target language to create a native-like language learning context for second language learners to follow, which emphasizes communication and interaction in the target language in the classroom through active use of fluency-based activities such as pairwork and groupwork role-play practices which create the target language speaking environment and thus encourage the students to use the target language to accomplish the assigned communicative tasks through a set of negotiations and cooperation in the process of practices. It allows students to make mistakes and errors in the speaking practices and activities, and teacher's role lies in offering necessary aids and guidance when students cannot initiate or continue speaking and communicating in the target language. Contrary to the traditional product-oriented language learning approaches, CLT not only focuses on the final product of the target language represented by correct use of grammatical structures and accurate pronunciation as a result, but also it underlines the interactive learning process which involves teacher and students' interdependent relationship, mutual support and advocates learner autonomy outside the classroom. In addition, CLT champions that students should bring real-life experiences into classroom learning, which links students' real communicative needs and desires with classroom instruction. Consequently, the students are highly motivated to speak in the target language in the class in order to solve their real-life problems in reality. Under the guidelines of interdependent and cooperative notions held by teacher and students, CLT is claimed to be the process-focused language learning and teaching approach which aims to improve students' spoken proficiency in the target language as an ultimate goal.

3. A Proposal for Realizing English Communicative Competence in China

3.1 What Is Communicative Competence?

"Communicative competence" refers to one's ability to encode and decode messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within particular contexts (Feng, 2013). Savignon (2002) further argues that communicative competence would depend on the cooperation of all the participants involved. Communication or negotiation of meaning is the only key to successful language learning. Through much debate, a more comprehensive definition of "communicative competence" is that it consists of grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972).

According to a recent academic definition by Richards (2006), the concept of "communicative competence" includes 4 aspects of language knowledge:

- 1) A learner knows the ways of using language for different purposes and functions.
- 2) A learner has the ability to vary the ways of using language based on the setting and the participants. For example, the learner is familiar with when to use formal speech and when not to. He also understands the subtle differences in the use of written and spoken language.
- 3) A learner knows the ways of producing and understanding various types of texts. For example, the learner has a good knowledge of how to produce the texts of narratives, reports, interviews and conversations.
- 4) A learner knows how to keep communication going in spite of having limitations in his language knowledge. For example, the learner has the ability to employ various communication strategies when he has difficulty in expressing his ideas.

3.2 Communicative Competence in Different Linguistic Contexts

In SLA and ELL field, there are 2 major different linguistic contexts around the world, i.e., English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL). Owing to distinctive historical, cultural, social, political, economical and educational background, the level of communicative competence is quite different between people in these 2 English learning environments. It is important to point out that in ESL countries and regions such as in India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Phillipines and Hong Kong, English is the official

language and widely used in people's real-life situations in their community over hundreds of years by the colonization of the English speaking country - the Great Britain, then the world superpower. Therefore, in spite of different accents and usage of English in these ESL countries as of today, the general level and quality of English communicative competence in these countries are very high, which strikes a stark contrast with those people in EFL countries. By contrast, English language learners in EFL context such as in China, Japan and Korea, learn English as a foreign language in the classroom and don't have the need or opportunity to speak out English to communicate between friends and family members and solve practical problems in real-life situations in their social community. As a consequence, English grammatical knowledge, listening, reading and writing skills are all learned in the classroom for the sake of language test and evaluation in EFL countries, which takes no account of the real use of speaking English as a community language in the society. Accordingly, communicative competence in EFL countries is very low in general, which is only acquired by English learning geniuses in a very small numbers. Usually, this group people have special linguistic talent and commit marked extra time in practicing speaking English, which is the main reason why they stand out as qualified and excellent English speakers with a relatively higher communicative competence compared with those mediocre peer learners. In addition, the process of fostering students' communicative competence is also subject to outside affective factors such as educational policy, governmental fund and support, teachers' English proficiency and teaching methods and approaches which involve the effective and efficient use of different teaching resources and materials, etc.

3.3 Today's EFL in China

Based on an article entitled "The Spoken Language Foundation is Being Neglected" by Y.J. Chang (in press, 2015), at the outset, it starts off with the written forms, seldom as the first step involves the process of building the spoken language foundation in real-life situations. It is mostly however being done in a classroom setting which is not being friendly to real-life situations. The rigid analyses of vocabulary, sentence structures etc. are a must, thus memorization is order of day. Contrary to the conviction, it creates a gigantic number of victims, wasting most people's energy, time and money. It is a true case of "Haste makes waste."

The typical victims of this neglect are the Chinese students learning English in school. For those who attempt to speak, their utterance is full of errors and vocabularies that don't fit in the native way. They sound choppy at best and vague or meaningless at worst. Above all, a great many students hate learning English as a subject in school. According to incomplete statistics, the number of victims is staggering—may be at 200 to 300 millions range and is still growing fast.

3.4 What Is the Method of "Learning to Speak in the Real-life Situations First, and Written Forms Afterwards"?

This SLA method is designed to meet the increasing demand of communicative competence in English among the students in China. Fundamentally, it is different from traditional English learning and teaching methods in that it starts off with speaking the whole sentences in the target language (i.e., English) in the native way first, with the aid of real-life objects and in real-life situations, then goes with the written forms (vocabulary, phrases, grammar and individual word's pronunciation and spelling etc.) afterwards. Since the traditional English learning and teaching places top priority in reciting and remembering vocabulary, phrases, and grammar to meet Gaokao's (The National College and University Entrance Examination's) requirements. As a result, communicative competence suffers in the process. Thus Chinese students are well trained through years to get a very high grade in such non-communicative testing in English. However, they can't utter any meaningful sentences of English in their daily lives. This cruel fact of life has existed for more than 35 years since China resumed its reformed English education since 1977. Yet it is not students' fault, nor is teachers' (nobody's fault), because they are all boxed in the Chinese social circumstances and educational bureaucracy. The question is who is to blame? The answer might lie with the examination—focused educational system. Past and today's textbooks and exams are fundamentally based on formal and written English, aiming to test students' understanding, reading and writing skills rather than speaking proficiency or communicative competence in English. Consequently, teachers and students pay little attention to oral English training, resulting in the outcome that students are unable to make a dialogue and communicate with each other in English in real daily lives. Another main reason as we all know is that a lack of native English speaking environment in China. Native speakers use informal language such as idiom and slang more often than formal and written English in their daily conversation, but such native English are not included in Chinese students' in-school curriculum and cannot be tested in current English exams. Even though students may pick up some authentic English in the native way from extracurricular books or online websites, they cannot master in using it in real-life situations and will at best make up some Chinglish or put-together English which sounds awkward to native English speakers or quickly forget it completely in a short period of time owing to little practice or application in real English

speaking environment.

4. The Outline of This Method

4.1 A Hypothesis of Human Language Proposed by Y.J. Chang (Personal Communication, July. 15, 2014)

- 1) Language is for living, it needs to be acquired in the living without the written forms.
- 2) Every language has its own native way of speaking.
- 3) Speaking is the foundation of a language, it needs to be built on the ability to speak whole sentences in the native way. Without the foundation, the learning process is a tall order.
- 4) The ability to speak whole sentences in the native way cannot be achieved by reciting vocabularies, sentences, grammar or individual pronunciation.

Based on this linguistic hypothesis, a new SLA method called “Learning to Speak in the Real-life Situations First, and Written Forms Afterwards” comes into being proposed & implemented by Y.J. Chang in China.

4.2 The Main Feature of This Method

This method is basically under the instruction of CLT, setting up its goal of cultivating students’ English communicative competence in the native way with the aid of a bilingual native speaker at best or a Chinese teacher who can speak authentic English at least. It starts with teaching students English by repeating complete whole sentences first, then after the foundation of speaking ability being set up, students may continue to learn those written-form English (i.e., vocabulary, phrases, grammar and individual word’s pronunciation and spelling etc.) with less difficulty and with much more efficiency. The reason why we should learn English by this order and this way is that it is human’s nature to learn a language by speaking whole sentences in the target language without any written forms in the first step, and it is the natural process for a child to learn his mother tongue by this way. Therefore, the gist of this method is setting up a quasi-native linguistic environment for language learners and trying to dig out their full potential and talent in speaking a foreign language in the native way as native speakers as the ultimate goal. In the process of learning, it is required that the learning materials and situations must come from real life, where students have experienced in person, so that they can easily remember and put into practice with their English partners again and again in simulative activities both in and out of classroom until they master and are able to make a conversation freely in English in the native way in their ordinary lives.

4.3 How to Implement in Practical Learning & Teaching Context?

Since it is just in its piloting phase as of writing this essay, its applicability and effectiveness need to be discussed, examined and perfected by teachers and its learners throughout practical learning and teaching process. The following is a proposal for implementing this method, consisting of 2 prongs which are complementary with each other.

4.3.1 “Speaking Foreign Language Hours” is One Prong

These hours are being held at the public places or in a studio where the real-life activities are a given and the talking partners are available. Having dialogues with a partner is essential for learning to speak a second language. The objective in these hours is to build the basic part of language foundation where an active role in talking with others without written forms is forged in the real-life activities. During these hours the learners are to learn the basics of the native way of speaking in whole sentences through the pre-arranged live activities with real objects. The need to speak a whole sentence is thus created in the activities. In short, these hours are for building the basic native language skills for learners.

The following is an example activity for reference:

Table 1. Birthday party activity

Activity: Birthday Party	
Subjects & Real objects: Many people, a birthday cake, candles, a match or a lighter, a knife.	
Description: When people gather together for your birthday, it is a birthday party. The highlight of the party is singing the happy birthday song and cutting the birthday cake, wishing the birthday person happy birthday or many happy return of the day. After the birthday person blows out the candle lights and cuts the cake for people to share. That is the high point of the party.	
Live situation: (A and B are conversations for practicing speaking whole sentences.)	
A	B
Today is your nineteenth birthday.	Yes, I am nineteen years old.
This is your birthday party.	Sure, let's have fun together.
The birthday cake looks nice.	There are nineteen candles.
Let us put the candles in the cake.	Light the candles with a match.
Happy birthday to you, happy birthday	Happy birthday to(me!)
Many happy return of the day!	Here is the knife, let us cut the cake.
Here is a piece of cake for you.	Thank you, it tastes good!

4.3.2 "Online Learning to Speak" Is the Other Prong

Learning to speak a second language used to be a tedious subject and students' burden in the classroom, while it will be interesting to learn in real-life situations. After all, this is where we humans do in learning to speak a language. Based on the Personal Daily Living Experiences (PDLE), an on-line platform has emerged on QQ for learning to speak a foreign language. There is no time and space constraints anymore on this platform, and it is easy and convenient for students to follow.

Here is a brief introduction to the procedure available on Tencent QQ website platform: Go ahead and send in a piece of PDLE documents written in the source language. This piece of PDLE has to be real, authentic and not a made-up one; short, simple, and not an elaborated writing, because we are learning the basic native speaking skills here. The learner will then receive a corresponding audio recording in the target language. What makes it so special about listening to the recording of a PDLE is that it will invoke your personal feelings and an instant recall of the situations involved. There is no need of the target language in writing and a recitation effort, such is the case with any other regular recordings. Thus, the nature's procedure of "learning to speak first and written forms afterwards" will be achieved for the written forms will be sent once the learner gets good at speaking the target language related to the PDLE for review and reading & writing practice. After accomplishing this goal, the learner may learn other subject matters (i.e., content-based material) in a higher level just as native language learners do. This platform merely makes a good use of human's intrinsic ability to learn a language. Learning to speak, we all engage in listening and speaking repeatedly in real-life situations. Therefore, if you were to listen to the audio recordings of PDLE and say after them over and over again with your partner, you would gradually be able to speak them without effort.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Since language is continuously changing over time, the leading teaching method or approach must adjust to the new requirements of SLA. CLT or the method of "Learning to Speak First and Written Forms Afterwards" is by no means the final answer—no doubt the next "revolution" in language teaching is already under way somewhere. But whatever innovations emerge, they will do so against the background of the changes brought about by CLT, and will need to accommodate or explicitly reject those changes. Certain of them are too important to maintain: the concern with the world beyond the classroom; the concern with the educational policy and plan within the school's curriculum; the concern with the learner as an independent individual and with his/her cognitive abilities; the concern with teacher's role in and outside the classroom; the concern with the creating of native language speaking environment; the view of language as structured to carry out the functions we want it to perform. Language teachers should see their professional education as consisting, amongst other things, in a constant questioning of methodology, in the knowledge that "There can be no one best method, however much research evidence supports it, which applies at all times and in all situations, with every type of learner." (Mitchell & Myles, 1998) Critical engagement with research into such topics as communicative language teaching, task-based instruction and content-based instruction etc. to language learning is an essential part of this professionalism, and can lead to new perspectives on in-classroom practices and activities and out-classroom experiences, to keener insights into the learning process. In short, all of these methodological studies are conducive to teachers' development in teaching a second language and students' mastery in speaking

a second language in daily life and using it properly in future career. It is a daunting task, yet as long as we keep researching and applying the new teaching method into real practice, and then start with a new sentence for doing checking, revising, and then adapting the results to the new context of teaching, we will be always finding a better way of teaching and learning a second language in the future around the world. Yes, there will be a better way but one can never ignore the first step or the front-end to CLT to build the foundation of a second language which is “Learning to speak in the real-life situations first and Written forms afterwards” as proposed in this article. As it suggests, this brand new method may be a complete English teaching and learning reform in China in the near future since it adapts to human’s natural learning mechanism in a new language and creates native-like and real-life speaking context for second language learners. With its advantages and applicability demonstrated in detail in this article, we believe that English teaching and learning reform is going to be under way in China as long as the top governmental and educational authorities see its value and give a top-down assists and support in its promotion and proliferation among the mass Chinese people and the common English language learners give a positive bottom-up feedback to prove its effectiveness and efficiency in learning English, especially in speaking English in the authentic and native way. It is believed that this SLA method must be the way out, unless however the thought process of a language can be duplicated by the Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the future.

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