

## Common Misconceptions on Communicative Language Teaching in China

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China

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**Abstract:** *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has set a trend since it was brought in China. Leading by education authorities and English teachers in tier-one cities, CLT quickly come into notice. However, many teachers found it not as effective as they thought then they started to question its theoretic basis and its value. In fact, some queries make little sense because English teachers do not truly understand the essence of CLT. This article gives a brief introduction of CLT and discusses some common misconceptions on it in China.*

**Keywords:** *Communicative Language Teaching; Misconceptions; Language Teaching Method*

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### 1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Communicative Language Teaching came into being in the 1970s when the European Economic Community was set up. The differential among those member countries' language had become the great obstacle for cultural and economic communication, so that the social needs brought about a new foreign language teaching approach—Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT follows a national syllabus and emphasizes the processes of communication to get information, and using language for social interaction with other people. It emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence. The term "communicative competence" was given by D. Hymes who invented it to go against N. Chomsky's theory about "language competence", which refers to knowledge of language system, namely, language rules. Chomsky accentuated psychological research on language while ignored the sociocultural features of language. Hymes advocated that "We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner". As such, language competence is just a partial of communicative competence. Based on Hymes' theory, American linguist M. Canale and M. Swain (1980) concluded that communicative competence should include: (1) Grammatical competence: The knowledge of the language itself, namely, its form and meaning; (2) Sociolinguistic competence: The appropriate use of the language in social context; (3) Discourse competence: It refers to one's ability to create coherent written text or conversation and the ability to understand them; (4) Strategic competence: It means strategies one employs when there is communication breakdown due to lack of resources. Hedge then added "Fluency" into it.

According to this, Hymes advocated 4 parameters of communicative competence :

- a. **Possibility:** The normalization of language, which is similar to Chomsky's "language competence".
- b. **Feasibility:** The specific use of language must be understandable. Although some sentences are in agreement with grammatical rules, its complicated structure is far more beyond people's ability to process and memorize the information, which is not feasible.
- c. **Availability:** The appropriate use of language in social context.
- d. **Performance:** A certain kind of language's probability of appearance under a practical point of view. Actually, it refers to the conventionality of language.

It can be said that CLT's answers for the questions mentioned above are comparatively better than other teaching methods'. The idea that language teaching goal is to develop learners' communicative competence soon became the consensus among teachers and scholars.

## 2. THE STUDY ON CLT IN CHINA

There has been more than thirty years since CLT was brought in China and the study of it can be roughly divided into three stages(Li, 2001) : from the late 1970s to the middle of 1980s; from the middle of 1980s to the late 1980s; from 1990s to nowadays. The first stage is the period when CLT theory was brought in; the second stage is the CLT use term, which was symbolized by putting CLT's teaching concept into Chinese foreign language teaching syllabus. The characteristic of the third stage is that people's attitude towards CLT started to become more rational and to evaluate it by combing its practical problems. Along with the issuing of English Curriculum Standard, the study of CLT can be divided into: theoretical introduction, research on application and reflections on problems. Hu Wenzhong(1982), Zhang Jianzhong(1983) and so on are the first batch of scholars to introduce CLT to Chinese. They made a comprehensive introduction about CLT's background information, theoretical basis, basic concepts and main characteristics. They also indicated the problems of CLT to be solved; Li Guanyi(1987) and Jia Delin(1989) are the representatives of the scholars who discussed about how to put CLT into practice in China. Their researchers involved training goals, textbook compilation and classroom teaching. Later, the study on application of CLT came down to many aspects: Middle school English teaching(Chen, 1991), English test(Xu, 1992), business English teaching(Chen, 1998), etc; Gao Shengbin(1994) and Li Yujun(2001) mainly reflected the problems when putting CLT into practice in China. They discussed the difficulties of CLT in foreign language teaching, or proposing some strategies, or listing questions for others to ponder with their approval for CLT.(Zhang, 2006)

However, the implementation of CLT becomes worrying from the late 1980s to nowadays for its result is not that satisfactory. Then more and more teachers and scholars start to query the theoretic basis and value of CLT. Some of them favor CLT and just think that there are lots of difficulties for teachers to carry it out in classrooms while some insist that the essence of CLT is questionable. Though rigorous research on CLT has been conduct, there are also several misconceptions.

## 3. COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ON CLT

### 3.1. CLT is a Specific Teaching Method

There is a big difference between those two English terms: "Approach" and "Method". However, both of them can be translated into one Chinese word, i.e., "Fa"("法"). Quite a few scholars translated the foreign literature into Chinese that was not faithful to the origins, which has mislead some other scholars and teachers. For instance, Lu Ziwen quoted J. Yalden and D. Nunan's works to define his position by saying that Yalden thought CLT had developed into 5 major types, among which Task-based Language Teaching was the newest. However, when Yalden talked about the concept communicative language teaching, he did not refer to the specific teaching approach "Communicative Language Teaching" (Zhang, 2009).

Dating back to 1960s, E.M Anthony discussed the difference between "Approach", "Method" and "Technique" by ranking them: "Technique" put "Method" into practice, and "Method" confirms with "Approach". Clearly, "Approach" is on the top. Then J Richards and T Rodgers modified and expanded Anthony's ranking pattern.<sup>1</sup> "Approach", which refers to the essence of language and language learning, is still on the top; what they called CLT means the total solution or methodology, which differs from any specific techniques that used by teachers in classrooms. Different methods or techniques can be adopted under an approach. In brief, "Approach" is axiomatic while "Method" is procedural. Unfortunately, many teachers especially those who haven't truly understand the connotation of these terms simply believe that just let students making conversations in class means putting CLT into practice. The truth is that CLT characterized as a broad approach to teaching, rather than as a teaching method with a defined set of classroom practices.

After CLT being introduced in China, it seems be all the rage till these days. S.Bax (2004) said that it was not an accidental phenomenon in China. Both teachers and scholars around the world approved an idea: CLT was not only advanced but the sole correct language teaching approach. The one who did not adopt CLT would become outdated. Bax(2004) called this kind of concept "the CLT Attitude". Adopting CLT is regarded as a tag of an excellent teacher. English teachers deeply believe that they would be strictly punished unless they adopt CLT. But, the linguist H.G.Widdowson said that it certainly was good to adopt CLT while teaching; if didn't, however, no one would be strictly

<sup>1</sup> Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. CAMBRIDGE UNIV. PR.

punished. Only adopting “pure” CLT in class is impossible; and the “pure” CLT never exist. (Jia, 1989) A.M.Shaw mentioned that “communicative approaches and purely structural approaches, though conceptually distinct, are in no way mutually exclusive; indeed they may well be seen as being complementary.” in Foreign-Language Syllabus Development. As English teachers always like using “pure” CLT, the traditional teaching methods then be excluded. Actually, CLT is not in contradiction to the traditional ones.

### 3.2. “Communicate” Equals to “Talk”

It is very common to abuse the terms especially referring to the discussion about “communicate”. As the famous applied linguist H Widdowson pointed out in 1990 that the prevalent way to indicate the characteristic of language teaching method in the past decade, in a word, was ‘communicative’. But this could not clearly show its characteristic. This term “communicate” has been casually discussed, also has been freely regarded as a signal of praising, which has made its descriptive value gone. The descriptive value of communicate is a special connotation based on applied linguistics, i.e.: the possibility, the feasibility, the availability and the acceptability concluded by D. Hymes; M Halliday’s theory of linguistic function; H Widdowson’s dichotomy of communicative competence (Competence vs Performance); M Ganale & M Swain’s 4 models of communicative competence (Grammatical Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence, Discourse Competence, Strategic Competence).

Abusing the term “communicate”<sup>2</sup> leads to the consequence that “communicate” is replaced by “talk” or “making conversation”, which means the use of speech for informal exchange of views or ideas or information etc. More and more importance has been attached to oral English than its written form. It goes against Canale & Swain’s Discourse Competence, which refers to language learners’ ability to create coherent written text or conversation and the ability to understand them. From here we can see that CLT has never depreciate the value of written English. However, a large number of English teachers in China who are in favor of CLT believe that oral English is the most important in class.

Another outcome of regarding “communicate” as “talk” is that most implementer of CLT just pay attention to social conventions, and squeeze western literature out of class. Actually, it is not good for language learners to improve their communicative competence. English teachers believe that CLT emphasizes daily communication in real life situations, and language learners need to know how to use language to deal with routine matters. So that when talking about “culture”, lots of English teachers just introduce social etiquette to English learners especially at the early stage of English learning. For instance, English speakers care a lot about their privacy; asking others’ ages or income is impolite; showing your thankfulness instead of modesty when you are complimented..... Indeed, these social conventions contribute to fluent verbal communication. However, English learners’ communicative competence can not get comprehensive development if they know few about English-speaking countries’ history, literature, economic, politics, etc.

### 3.3. CLT Pays Few Attention to Language Form

As mentioned before, many teachers viewing CLT as a symbol of scientific language teaching approach. They are eager to put this brand-new language teaching approach into practice. Teachers care about students’ interests, offering lots of opportunity for students to communicate via making conversation and role playing instead of pouring new words and grammar rules into students’ brains; They no longer act as the only controller of the class but let the students to handle; They follow CLT’s proposal that mistakes are acceptable, so they do not correct students for fear that students’ will be interrupted. Sadly, the effect of teaching English by using CLT is not satisfying according to the result of plenty of questionnaires handed out to English teachers after CLT being introduced in China. At a time, a great number of teachers and scholars start to question the scientificity of CLT.

Certainly, CLT do convey an ideal of learner-centeredness and it propose that it is normal for students to make mistakes. But it never ask teachers not to instruct language learners to neglect language structure. Talking about CLT’s principles:

- a. **The communicative principle:** Activities that involve real communication promote learning.
- b. **The task principle:** Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning (Johnson, 1982).
- c. **The meaningfulness principle:** Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhang, S. W. (2008). Study of tbl/tbt theoretic research in china. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University*

A tendency among these 3 principles is that meaning is being putting more emphasis on. Then the definition of CLT has been simplified as any kind of language teaching approach as long as it focuses on the meaning and use of language instead of language form, and its goal is aimed at developing language learners' communicative competence. English teachers suddenly changed their former way of teaching by listing meaning instead of language form as the only important item. Obviously, it violate the origin intention of CLT. Students, especially the starters, can never become a successful language learner without studying the structure of the language. If language learners skirt language form or structure to a large extent but depending too much on communicative strategies and unorganized vocabulary, their systematic language development can not be assured. Skehan pointed out that language learning required the interlanguage system gradually becoming more complicated and closer to target language system. And if language learners want to trigger the interlanguage development, they must pay attention to language form, which is to strengthen the awareness of language structure.

Besides, if we look deeper into the goal of CLT, it is not difficult to get the conclusion that CLT also concerns about the language form. The starting point of applied linguistic theory, which influence CLT a lot, is to figure out what is language, what to teach, then exporting how to teach. The ultimate goal of CLT is to develop language learners' communicative competence, which includes both the knowledge about the language itself, which includes: spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure, semantics; and the knowledge about how to use the language appropriately in communicative situation. Not to mention that grammatical competence is putting at the first place of those four dimensions of communicative competence.

In China, almost all kinds of English level tests are paper-based examinations. Clearly, language form is the test objective. Neither can English learners get good grades, nor can they communicate successfully with others in English before they mastering language form. But CLT is not to be blame because of English teachers misunderstanding of its connotation.

### **3.4. CLT Ignores Teaching Environment**

CLT put developing learners' communicative competence at the first place. Meanwhile, it stresses that other teaching methods should serve for this goal, which has been regarded as the soul and essence of it. Then skeptics think that CLT's goal is primary and any other elements among teaching process are secondary, which is contrary to modern language teaching theory. (Tian, 2007)Because according to Stern (1983:43-50), language teaching includes 4 vital concepts: language view, learning view, language teaching view and language teaching environment. Language teaching environment refers to the whole social, cultural, political environment. It relates to the status of language and language teaching in society. Language teaching environment is the one that plays a decisive role. The opponents of CLT insist that CLT has delivered an information: the most important things that teachers need to do is to create communication context and help language learners devote themselves into the pre-set communicative activity no matter under what kind of language teaching environment with what kind of learning goals. So that CLT ignores the language teaching environment, which is inadvisable (Zhang, 2006)

Actually, there is no convincing evidence to prove this accusation. In fact, CLT is a learner-centered teaching approach. Learners' experience is extraordinary important because of the difference between classroom activities and real life situations. Learner-centered is not equal to the leading role of language learners in classrooms. Essentially, it means that teachers should value learners' former experience and their current level, and teachers must attach importance to learners' interest when they are designing classroom activities. Language learners themselves are in the language teaching environment, their experience can bridge the gap between language in real life and language in class. If teachers ignore environment and learners' situation to create the context, it is not the CLT but the teachers themselves to blame because of their misconceptions. The accusation that CLT goes against modern teaching theory is illogical and unreasonable. Personally, I take a dim view of it.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion about the misconceptions of CLT, it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that the reason why CLT is not as effective as teachers' assumption is largely because that English teachers' attitude towards CLT is extreme-either regarding it as the only scientific teaching approach, or being busy in finding fault with it. People who think CLT excluding traditional, paying few atten-

tion to language form, ignoring language teaching environment are those who haven't understand the essence of CLT. This can be an alert that it is unwise to accept a new teaching approach or method blindly and to put it into practice before think twice. It will slow down the pace of English teaching, wasting researchers and teachers' energy. Worst of all, it can lead to more misconceptions on that approach or method. English teachers should spend more time and energy in digging the essence of classic theories. Only based on the comprehensive understanding of the teaching approach or method can it be correctly and effectively put into practice.

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