

Action Research as a Model for the Enhancement of Communicative Competence among Learners of English as a Foreign Language in Mainland China

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Abstract: There are various approaches of language teaching, in which communicative language teaching is the dominant approach worldwide. CLT approach allows language learners to express themselves and their views through collaborative activities undertaken during classes. Communicative competence is a crucial part of language competence, which accounts most for language learners. Thus, the research on the enhancement of communicative competence is significant. Though there are already some studies exploring the improvement of learners' communicative competence, there are few researches on enhancing the communicative competence of learners of English as a foreign language in mainland China. To address the issue of Chinese learners' weakness in communicative competence, this research adopts a CLT approach to seek for solutions for the problems in English language teaching and learning in mainland China.

1. Introduction

In mainland China, English is a compulsory subject from primary education to tertiary education. Thus, people devote a lot of money and time to master English language. This research is concerned with the enhancement of EFL learners' communicative competence, particularly in speaking and writing. The interest in doing this research originates from my concerns about the current situation of English language learning and teaching in mainland China, the problems arising from the current teaching of English speaking and writing, and problems encountered by learners in their learning process.

As revealed in the scores of IELTS tests for academic purpose, Chinese learners' communicative competence of English has not reached the global mean level. According to the statistics in the White Book of IELTS in mainland China, the mean band scores of Chinese candidates in 2017 is 5.72, ranking 34th among 40 most frequent countries in the world. As shown in Figure 1, from 2012 to 2017, there was an increase in the mean band score from 5.56 to 5.72. However, Chinese test takers' academic mean band score is still lower than those of other Asian countries: Thailand (5.98), South Korea (5.97), Vietnam (5.92), Nepal (5.91) and Japan (5.81). Among the four sections in IELTS test, test takers in mainland China behave relatively worse in writing and speaking sections compared with their performance in listening and reading sections.

Fig.1. IELTS Mean Band Score

Year	Overall	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
2017	5.72	5.88	6.15	5.32	5.27
2012	5.56	5.67	5.9	5.16	5.25

Therefore, Chinese students lack of English communicative competence, for speaking and writing are considered to be two main parts reflecting learners' communicative competence. Savignon [13] defined communicative competence as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning. In order to enhance Chinese learners' communicative competence, many more teachers have adopted communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in their classrooms. CLT encourages language learners to acquire language knowledge as well as the ability to use the language [13]. Unlike the

traditional teaching approaches, CLT is rooted in a shift “from emphasis on form to emphasis on communication” [5]. It also involves classroom activities that engage learners with language use in a more meaningful and authentic manner. CLT thereby supports the teaching and learning processes by enhancing their power and vitality. CLT enables language learners to communicate in target language.

To address the issue of Chinese learners’ weakness in communicative competence, this research adopts a CLT approach to seek for solutions for the problems in English language teaching and learning in mainland China. The participants of this research are 40 English major students studying in their second year at a local university in Xi’an, Shaanxi province.

2. Communicative Competence

The concept 'communicative competence' was developed in the anglophone world by Hymes' critique of Chomsky and in the germanophone literature by Habermas [3]. Chomsky proposed and defined the concepts of competence and performance, advocates for a communicative view in applied linguistics. Hymes [8] defined communicative competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky’s linguistic view of competence. According to Harmer, communicative competence refers to the knowledge of 'how' to use the language and the capacity to produce infinite number of sentences. A sense of appropriateness in inter- personal relations develops this competence [6]. Canale and Swain [4] interpret communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication. Bachman [1] defines communicative language ability as a concept comprised of knowledge or competence and capacity for appropriate use of knowledge in a contextual communicative language use.

For the components of communicative competence, M. Canale and M. Swain distinguishes four competence areas: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence(1980). Grammatical competence includes knowledge of phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation and sentence formation. Sociolinguistic competence includes knowledge of sociocultural rules of use. It is concerned with the learner’s ability to handle for example settings, topics and communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts. In addition, it deals with the use of appropriate grammatical forms for different communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts. Discourse competence is related to the learner’s mastery of understanding and producing texts in the modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It deals with cohesion and coherence in different types of text. Strategic competence refers to compensatory strategies in case of grammatical or sociolinguistic or discourse difficulties such as the use of reference sources, grammatical and lexical paraphrase, requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, or problems in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status or in finding the right cohesion devices. It is also concerned with such performance factors as coping with the nuisance of background noise or using gap fillers

Unlike Canale and Swain, van EK claims that communicative ability comprises six competences: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, and social competence [15]. Similar to Canale, Swain and van EK’s understanding of communicative competence, L. Bachman (1990) argues that: 1) language competence includes the acquisition of both the knowledge of grammar rules and that of how to achieve communication; 2) the use of language is a dynamic process that is enhanced by the components of language competence. L. Bachman holds that language competence is composed of two parts: organizational competence, which includes grammatical competence; textual competence and pragmatic competence, which include both illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. In this research, the researcher adopts Canale and Swain’s interpretation of the components of communicative competence.

3. Communicative Language Teaching

According to Richards [11], the trends in language teaching can be divided into three phases: traditional approaches (up to the late 1960s), classic communicative language teaching (1970s to 1990s) and current communicative language teaching (late 1990s to now). Communicative language teaching (CLT) refers to both processes and goals in classroom learning" [12]. The central concept in CLT is "communicative competence". Savignon [13] defined communicative competence as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning; and CLT encourages language learners to acquire language knowledge as well as the ability to use the language. Unlike the traditional teaching approaches, CLT is rooted in a shift "from emphasis on form to emphasis on communication" (Cook, 2003:36).

Littlewood [10] states, "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language." Littlewood also holds that CLT provides learners whole-task practice, improves learners' motivation, allows natural learning and creates a context which supports learning (1981:17). Howatt argues that CLT has two versions: a strong version and a weak version. The strong version is described as "learning to use language", which claims "language is acquired through communication". The weak version is "using English to learn it", which advocates "the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes" [7]. Thus, CLT is important in language teaching.

4. The Action Research Design

To address the issues in the process of developing Chinese learners' communicative competence, this research adopts an Action Research (AR) model. Wallace [15] defines AR as 'the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some area of professional practice'. Benson [2] points out that action research is often regarded as the most accessible form of research for teachers, for it aims at solving problems encountered in everyday practice. This research follows a AR model with four phases suggested by Kemmis [9]: developing a plan, acting to implement the plan, observing the effects of action in the context in which it occurs, and reflecting on these effects as the basis for further planning.

Phase one: developing a plan. The first step is to design the whole process of this research: designing the course content of English writing and speaking in a communicative language teaching approach, determining the data collection and method.

Phase two: acting to implement the plan. In this phase, the researcher carries out the whole teaching plan. In pre-teaching step, the researcher conducts a pre-teaching test and a survey using questionnaires to acquire the data of learners' communicative competence in English writing and speaking; In while-teaching step, the researcher conducts semi-structured interviews and ask learners to write reflection diaries. In post-teaching step, the researcher conducts a post-teaching test and a survey using questionnaires to acquire the data of the enhancement of learners' communicative competence after taking the designed courses.

Phase three: observing the effects of the action. In this phase, the researcher organizes and analyze the data collected in the second phase to observe the effects of the action, finding out Chinese learners' problems in English speaking and writing, discuss major finding with colleagues, and conclude the impact of CLT teaching approach on the enhancement of Chinese learners' communicative competence.

Phase four: reflecting on these effects. The researcher reflects on her own practice and come out with newer questions about the enhancement of learners' communicative competence to refine her teaching.

5. Findings

5.1. Problems

Through this research, the researcher finds that EFL learners in mainland China have many problems in English speaking and writing.

(1) EFL learners lack of confidence and cannot convey meaning effectively when speaking English;

(2) EFL learners have not gained enough vocabulary, which results in their not fluent speech and ill-written essays;

(3) EFL learners have not acquired good knowledge of English grammar;

(4) EFL learners are affected by their mother language pattern when writing in English.

5.2 Solutions

To address those problems encountered by EFL learners in mainland China, the following solutions can be adopted in English language teaching.

(1) Use of Audio-visual Aids

To improve learners' speaking competence, audio-visual aids, like videos, radio and television, language games, pictures, are used to make learning more effective. They can arouse the interest of the learners and motivate them to learn faster. What's more, they create a lively atmosphere in the classroom, which results in the total participation of the learners. The aids give a clear context for teaching English speaking. This brings learners in a direct contact with the object.

(2) Group Discussion

To improve learners' speaking competence, group discussion is a very fruitful activity, which is highly motivating and ensures full participation of the learners. The teacher can suggest a few topics or let the learners to decide the topic.

(3) Writing Workshop

To improve learners' writing competence, the teacher can ask students to form different workshops to do writing tasks. In workshops, students brainstorm their ideas of writing a short essay on certain topics, and they discuss their ideas and then prepared their rough drafts. Later, they revised their rough drafts and get redrafted one. Finally, they edit and proofread their drafts and get the final essays. In this way, students develop their writing skills and improve their writing competence.

6. Conclusion

CLT is the dominant language teaching approach worldwide. It is believed that this approach has strengthened teaching and learning processes because of its focus on the power of communication. Communication is considered as the source of learning and is the medium of teaching. The findings of this research can be applied to the future language teaching plan. When designing the teaching plan of English classes, teachers can adopt communicative teaching method. The activities which will be used in this research can also be used by other language teachers in China.

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