

English Communicative Language Teaching in Chinese Senior High Schools: Current Situation, Problems and Countermeasures

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Abstract: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method is prevalent in second language teaching field, China is a populous country which takes the second language--English learning as a key subject, so the development of CLT in China has the great research value. By using the methods of questionnaire and interview, this paper focuses on current situation of the implementation of CLT in English lessons of senior high schools in China. It analyses that although the Chinese government has issued a series of documents supporting implementing of CLT in English lessons, as well as students have positive attitudes towards the implementation, the implementation is not satisfying. This is resulted by the limitation of lesson hours, students' lack of background knowledge and the large number of participants. According to current situation of the implementation of CLT in English lessons in senior high schools in China and the existing problems of it, this paper puts forward the corresponding countermeasures, hoping to be useful to senior high schools' English teachers.

1. Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching emerged in the 1970s ^[1]. It emphasizes on students' needs and encourages students to communicate actively ^[2], which coincides with the educational concept of "student-centred" advocated by Chinese second curriculum reform. However, due to different educational ideas and teaching models, the implementation of CLT in China has encountered some obstacles ^[3].

In order to explore the implementation of CLT in Chinese English lessons in senior high schools, this paper takes teachers and students from four senior high schools as research objects. Through questionnaires and interviews, it examines the current situation of the implementation of CLT in Chinese contexts, analyses the main problems and puts forward corresponding solutions. This paper aims to improve in efficiency of CLT in Chinese senior high schools.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Questionnaires

There are two types of questionnaires designed for two groups which are students and teachers. The questionnaire for students is divided into four parts, and contains a total of 20 questions. The first part aims to find out the background of the students, including the students' genders, grades and English levels. The second section is a survey of the context of classes students in, including account of classmates and their English levels. The third part is a survey of the English teaching modes of their teachers. Last section is about students' views and attitudes towards CLT, including the rationality of their teachers' communicative activities's design and students' feedback.

Teachers' questionnaire is divided into three parts and contains 13 questions. The first section is about teachers' basic information, including genders, the grades they are teaching, ages, education backgrounds and their majors. The second part is asking for the situation of implementation of CLT in English lessons. The third part is teachers' feedback on CLT, such as how well about

communicative activities used in classes and students' performance.

2.2. Survey and interviewees

In this essay, 164 teachers and students from four different senior high schools in Liaoning Province and Hebei Province in China are investigated through questionnaires and interviews. After they done the questionnaire survey, three teachers and four students participated in further interview and they showed their views on the prospect of implementation of CLT in Chinese classrooms. In order to make the results more reliable, this project selected the subjects who are reliable and professional.

3. The current situation of implementation of CLT in China

The Chinese government has attached great importance to English lessons and communicative activities in lessons in these decades. According to the data from the website of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2018, there are more than 3 million senior high school students in China. Except for a few advanced regions and policy pilot sites, most of students begin to learn English from the third grade of primary school ^[4]. At the same time, the Chinese government stressed the importance of the cultivation of students' English communicative competence. The document No. 35 issued by COM of PRC in 2001 mentioned in the appendix that students should be encouraged to actively participate in English lessons activities and express their ideas freely, and teachers should create the supportive language environment for students. In September 2014, China's State Council issued the "Implementation Opinions on deepening the reform of examination and enrolment system", which proposed to promote the reform of examination content and form. The China English proficiency scale issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018 also takes communicative skill as an important reference ^[5].

Besides policy, teaching is one of the factors that influence the use of CLT. In this survey, more than 90% of the teachers got bachelor's degree and above, most of them graduated from professional normal universities. Only a few have never been exposed to CLT, and the rest have gained relevant knowledge of CLT in colleges and universities, which proves the popularity of CLT in English majors in Higher Education institutions. However, the implementation of CLT is not universal. The most commonly used approaches in the classroom are direct teaching and grammar translation. Only 15% of the English teachers use CLT frequently in English classes, while three-quarters of teachers express that they occasionally use it. Listening and speaking lessons are the most frequently class types where CLT is used. Apart from that, there are very few teachers who never use CLT. Group discussion and teacher-student dialogue are the main communicative activities, followed by role-playing simulation activities. The above phenomenona show that although CLT is widely spread in China's English teaching field, its application in classrooms is not ideal.

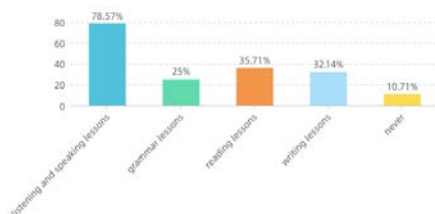


Figure 1 Types of lessons CLT be used

More than half of students say that teachers occasionally design discussion activities in English classes, less than half of the students show that there are half teachers' lectures and half students' discussions in one lesson, only a small number of students express that the lesson was completely dominated by the teacher and no student discussion activity. Group activity is the mainstream for students to communicate. Nearly half of teachers design the group activity as one of the initial ways of communication in class. More than half of the students express that teachers sometimes carry out oral communication activities during the lesson, and a quarter of them say that teachers almost will

not design oral communication activities during the class. Those show that from the perspective of students the frequency of using communicative approach and communicative activities in the lesson of Chinese English teaching is not low. The reason why teachers and students have different attitudes towards the implementing frequency of communicative approach may be that teachers judge CLT from a more professional perspective, while students' understanding of CLT is not clear, and some other activities are also included in communicative activities by them.

According to the feedback from the students, the activities designed by teachers are very reasonable. Most teachers will design scenarios suitable for oral activities or design activities with suitable themes which close to students' life. And in order to assure the fluency of oral English as well as protect students' self-esteem, teachers prefer to correct oral errors made by students after their speakings. Almost every student shows interest in the communicative activities designed by the teacher and is willing to participate in the oral activities. They would like to communicate more in the class as they hold the point that oral activities will arise their interests in English learning, increase their enthusiasm in class participation, give them more opportunities to speak English and enhance their friendship with classmates. This shows that the communicative activities designed by English teachers are able to encourage students to participate in the classroom, and students have a high willingness to communicate.

4. Problems when implementing CLT in China

Most teachers believe that the use of CLT in class will make students participate in the class, also it can improve students' oral communication ability from the aspects of fluency and pronunciation. However, the survey releases that there are three main obstacles to the use of CLT in China's English Classroom: students' limited English proficiency as well as lack of background knowledge lead to they are unable to express their ideas in English fluently, the second is the number of participants is too large to satisfy the needs of all students, last one is about time limitation.

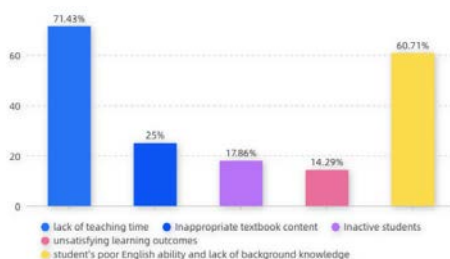


Figure 2 Poor outcomes of implementation of CLT

4.1. Students' poor English proficiency and limitation of background knowledge

First of all, according to the survey, although the activities designed by teachers are reasonable and interesting, students show strong enthusiasm for participation, the degree of participation in CLT lesson is not high. Less than half of the students express that they will take the initiative to answer the relative questions, most of the other students say that they will answer the questions only when turning to them and they have to do that. Even one in ten students hold the point that they do not want to participate in the discussion at all. The main reason is that students' oral speaking ability is insufficient to support their dialogues, and they do not know much about the related topics thus have no idea about what to say in the class. Taking the third edition of compulsory English for senior high school in the new curriculum standard of China People's education press as an example, the theme of unit 5 is "Canada True North", which introduces the protagonist Li Daiyu's travel experience in Canada, the vehicles he used along the way and the changes in the scenery he saw. The theme of this text is very far away for students. China and Canada belong to two hemispheres. Students know little about Canada. Therefore, to learn this unit students are supposed to use their imagination and search on the internet about Canada. However, in order to improve the efficiency of delivering the key points and prolong the time of learning, teachers rarely spend time on

introducing the background of the text. students also share that because of academic stress. Students seldom have time to surf on the Internet and search information about background, which makes they have no idea about this topic. At the same time, most of the content in the textbook is new. In this condition, it is not enough for students to learn cultural knowledge only, but also they are supposed to learn key grammar and words occur in the text. What is more, according to the interview, teachers' fast teaching rhythm makes it difficult for students to skilfully apply the new knowledge after learning. The above two points are totally contrary to the principle of authenticity of materials and the principle of supportive environment for learners in CLT ^[2], which are obstacles to the implementation of CLT in China.

4.2. A large number of participants

The large number of participants is one of the main reasons that hinder the implementation of communicative approach in Chinese English classrooms. According to the survey results, only less than a quarter of classes contain below 25 students, most of the classes are between 25 to 50 students, the rest are more than 50 learners in one class. This is one of the main reasons why teachers mainly use group discussion to apply communication activities. The large number of participants makes teachers unable to realise students' communication ability one by one detailly and produce feedback orientally. Meanwhile, due to the large number of participants, students' communicative skills in the same class are various, teachers cannot meet the needs of all students in the classroom ^[2].

4.3. Time limitation

Learners' needs are one of the main factors in CLT ^[2]. However, the main demand of Chinese senior high English learners is to get higher score in English test of the college entrance examination. In senior high school period, students have to study all of eight textbooks in three years. According to the interview, teachers usually finish delivering all of books in the first two years, that is, four semesters, to save time for the reviewing of important knowledge points in the last year. In order to improve the students' absorption rate of knowledge, teachers often use grammar translation method, do not provide any background information to save time. The teachers announce key points in front of students, while students write significant clauses and grammar on notebook so that they can review them after class. Therefore, insufficient time is the reason for less communication activities in class.

5. Strategies for better implementation

From above survey results, we can see that problems arising from the implementation of CLT urgently need to be solved. How to improve the implementation effect of CLT in China is the key point. The author believes that it can start from the following aspects.

5.1. Arranging activities in right order and combining English teaching with other subjects

As students' lack of English ability and background knowledge, teachers are supposed to put communicative activities at the end of each unit, which makes students not only have opportunities to use the newly delivered knowledge but also are given the chance to review what they have learnt and enhance the new knowledge through using them, which is possible to solve the problem of poor English proficiency. If the communication activities are carried out without explaining the new vocabularies and phrases, the students need to learn not only the background knowledge to support communicative activities but also the relevant English items, and that will put great burden to the students as well as violate the principle of considering the students' needs ^[2]. In addition, combining the knowledge with other subjects is a good idea. Using the second language English to review what students have learnt in other subjects will provide students with the background, also enhance the relevant subjects knowledge points. For example, the Chinese character “力” in physics can be shown as "F" which is the first letter of the English word “force”, and the word “维他命” in biology is the transliteration of vitamin. All these items can be combined with English teaching. In

other words, in terms of curriculum setting, students can be provided with background knowledge through the contents from other aspects, at the same time, students can consolidate the subject contents through the combination of reviewing according to English lessons.

5.2. Using group activities

For the problem of too many learners in a lesson, group discussion mentioned above is an ideal solution, but what should be paid attention to is how to preform group activities. The teacher can divide the students into groups according to the lesson content, with 4-6 students in each group, whic gives full play to the students' subjectivity in the class and enable more students to participate in the discussion as Asian students prefer to show their roles in small scale groups ^[6]. In group division section, in order to make sure that all students can effectively join in the task, group members should come from different levels, since students have different background knowledge leads to information gap between them and promotes active communication ^[7]. On the contrary, if students are too close to each other or at the same proficiency level, communication will not be ideal. In addition, teachers should be the providers of teaching resources to help students, they should reduce their role and not make a fuss, manage to encourage students to speak and make students become the main role of the lesson ^[8]. Apart from that, teachers should get students' interests in the process of auditing, and take it as an important reference for group teaching in the future, so as to better implementation of CLT.

5.3. Cutting the contents of textbooks and combine teaching with quality education

Considering the high pressure of the course and insufficient class time, the author supports that teachers should adjust the content of textbooks appropriately based on students' needs, increase or decrease the textbook content reasonably according to the students' English proficiency, adjust the teaching content to be suitable for communicative teaching. The aim of these actions is to ensure more students will participate in English lessons. According to interviews with students, most students say it is more difficult to learn optional textbook contents than compulsory textbook. Even if they have learned those books once, they can only remember part of optional textbook contents. Therefore, teachers are supposed to appropriately reduce teaching this part according to students' performance ^[9] to avoid wasting valuable teaching time and to improve the delivery efficiency. Meanwhile, senior high school English teaching should be combined with the quality education theory advocated by the Ministry of Education of China instead of putting the significance on the score only. Teaching English through CLT is to make students perform better in classes, as well as to enhance students communication ability. Under the current social context, English should not be a simple test oriented tool, but a practical communication tool.

6. Conclusion

Senior high school education is last but not least stage of China's basic education, the college entrance examination will determine the university' s level and major of students in the future. English, as one of the three basic subjects in senior high school, is an important factor affecting students' major choosing. At this stage, China's senior high school English education should not be limited to meet students' exam needs, but should be in line with international standards, combined with quality education theory and show the great significance of communication in language learning. From this point of view, the above analysis of the current situation of CLT in Chinese senior high school English lessons, the analysis of problems and countermeasures, will have important practical significance and theoretical value.

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