

# The Relationship between Traditional English Grammar Teaching and Communicative Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** This paper reconsiders the functions of the traditional English grammar teaching and the communicative language teaching. Through analysis and practice, we think that they are not opposed to each other. In order to improve the students' ability and gain better teaching results, the two kinds of teaching approaches should not be used respectively. On the contrary, we'd better combine them together and use them flexibly in our teaching work.

**Key words:** traditional grammar teaching; communicative teaching; relationship

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, many teachers have been trying all kinds of teaching methods such as, TESOL, EFL, CLT, etc. Among them, communicative language teaching (CLT) is the most favorite. It started in early 1980s. During its development over the last 20 years, CLT has gradually become a teaching idea which has been confirmed by the language educators all over the world. The core of this method is to improve the students' sociolinguistic competence as well as their linguistic competence. In a word, CLT's main idea is to improve the students' communicative competence and to overcome the disadvantages of traditional teaching approach.

## 2. The Practice of Communicative Language Teaching Approach

### 2.1 The concept of sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence means the ability that the students can use the proper language on different occasions. How to help students express what they want to say? CLT thinks providing them the language situation in the classroom is the best way. Hence, we must create all kinds of situations in classroom to let them practice.

### 2.2 The theory of task-based CLT

Task-based teaching is an important way of CLT. The original impetus for task-based teaching came from Bangalore Project, which acted both against the traditional form of EFL used in India and the type of communicative teaching then practiced. The main ground was the refusal to recognize the classroom as a "real" situation. A real classroom has activities that are proper for educational tasks. The tasks are defined not linguistically but in an order based on difficulty. "The whole-class activity consists of a pedagogic dialogue in which the teacher's questions are, as in other classrooms, invitations to the students to demonstrate their ability as

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learners, not from assumed roles in simulated situations or from their individual lives outside the classroom". Educational value depends on the validity of the tasks and their usefulness as vehicles for the students.

### **3. The Misunderstanding of the Way of Improving Linguistic Competence**

#### **3.1 The concept of linguistic competence**

The language competence means that one has a good knowledge of grammar and words, he or she can speak, read and write in grammatical foreign language. In conversation, if mistakes were made in one's pronunciation, grammar or words spelling, it will lead to misunderstanding and boredom to others, and even damage their relationship. If we only understand what others say partially and superficially, the communication of ideas can't be properly realized. Therefore, our purpose in teaching is to improve the students' communicative competence, that is to say, we should try to enhance the students' capability of using language in communication in a correct way. It is crystal-clear that the improvement of communicative competence should be based on language practice.

#### **3.2 The misunderstanding of grammar teaching method**

The British linguist H.G Widdowson once pointed out that the speech activity has two levels, one is to regard listening, speaking, reading and writing as a means by which the students can grasp the rules of the language after repeated practices. The other is to regard listening, speaking, reading and writing as the ultimate purpose of teaching by which the students can use the language in communication in reality.

Some teachers believe that it is good to limit their students only in doing something like improving the communicative competence of their students. They pay little attention to the grammatical structure of their students' speaking. This is only one side of the coin. We all know that grammar is not only the core of a language, but a theoretical tool in regulating language. Those above- mentioned teachers ignore this idea; they pay their attentions only to the communicative function of the language and reject grammar. If a teacher teaches the students in communicative training blindly and fails to help them to summarize the characteristics of the sentence and compare it with other new sentences at proper time, the result will surely be that the students can't fully understand the new sentence and mistakes are unavoidable when they use it.

Some teachers think it is enough to explain knowledge and drill sentences because they are always worried that their students can't master the new knowledge. They even suspect the role of CLT, and mistakenly believe that the CLT is only used for strengthening the students' oral expression, and not for improving their grammar ability. Their students, therefore, can only have linguistic ability and are unable to have sociolinguistic ability. They can't put the knowledge into practice well in their daily life.

Actually speaking, the purpose of CLT is to enhance not only the sociolinguistic ability but also the linguistic ability of the students. So the ideas of the above-mentioned teachers are both one-sided. They regard grammar teaching as conflicting with communicative activities. These two groups of teachers are unable to understand that both ideas are closely related to each other, and they see only one side of the coin instead of two and inevitably go to extremes.

### **4. The Comparison of Teaching Effect**

How to teach students the grammar with the CLT?

The two principles provided by CLT:

(1) Grammar ability is a part of the communicative competence. The static and closed grammar should subordinate itself to the dynamic, open and creative communication. Grammar is nothing but a tool for teaching. Only by accurately understanding the role of grammar in English teaching, neither exaggerating it nor underestimating it, can we eventually come to a good result in grammar teaching.

(2) The relationship between grammar competence and communicative competence is that between “absorbing” and “practicing”. First, knowledge comes from practice. Students are required to participate in the reading and listening activities to observe and understand the structure and function of the grammar. After that, they should summarize the rule of grammar together with their teachers, and absorb the sentence easily in this way. Secondly, teachers should make “absorbing” in accordance with “practicing”, and help students to use the newly learned grammar in all kinds of “practicing” to make them understood

How to successfully apply this theory to grammar teaching?

I made an experiment with two different methods in Class A and Class B to identify the feasibility of CLT

Class A:

(1) Practice—creating an environment of listening and reading

Listening and reading is the first step for students to get in touch with new sentence patterns and grammar. After listening and reading exercises in classes, students will get familiar with the new sentence patterns and grammar little by little, and gradually give up their strange feelings of them. So listening and reading is the best way for students to make their acquaintance with the new sentence patterns and grammar.

(2) Absorbing—creating the environment of questioning

It's a kind of environment that students are absorbed in questions, and they must find the answers by themselves. The problem is that they can't do this if they don't work hard. We all know that the effective process in study is thinking. To begin with, the expectations and motives of thinking must rely on purpose. A question is a purpose. It means to give students a real goal and to sparkle their thought to create a good environment of questioning. In this way, students will change their passive language acceptance into active language absorbing. At the same time, it is also the process in which the teachers should give the students proper guidance.

(3) Practice—creating the environment of activities

It means that teachers should try their best to give students a chance to speak and let them engaged in activities in simulated environment. This kind of practice can excite the enthusiasms and initiatives of students. It needs a coordinated cooperation of students' sense organs to get ideal results in grammar rule. Therefore, we should give a certain period of time for students to make practical activities of this kind as much as possible. As the old proverb goes, practice makes perfect. We can say that the creation of the simulated environment of activities is of great importance and significance.

Class B:

I used only two methods creating the environment of listening, reading and doing some kinds of activities. In the first term, I hardly taught students grammar. Instead, I focused on oral drilling and activities. In classes, my students made mistakes quite often, because they couldn't grasp the rule of language. It was a very serious problem because they were unable to use the language they had learned.

There is one point that calls for our attention—the emphasis played by CLT on the grammar teaching must be

appropriate. If teachers give their students directions at the key points of grammar teaching and tell them how to sum up the rules, students will certainly bring the painted dragon to life by putting in the pupils of its eyes—add the touch that brings work of art to life. By this way, students' linguistic and communicative competence can be greatly improved. Therefore, we must teach our students grammar properly and should not separate it from communication. "We should put the language teaching into the larger framework of the CLT, and carry out language teaching through the communicative activities that is centered on communicative item. Hence we can bring into full play its strong points and overcome its weak points."(DENG Yun, 1998)

## 5. Conclusions

"The purpose of teachers' work is to develop the students' capability." (YE Sheng-tao) And our English Teaching Outline also stipulates that the English teaching aims at making students to acquire basic knowledge of a foreign language as well as the communicative competence by way of listening, speaking, reading and writing. With no doubt that all forms of purposeful language, spoken or written, we can give students a chance and condition to acquire the knowledge of grammar. And the grammar ability will help the students to understand and make spoken and written language correct. The grammar ability will also enable students to express themselves accurately and fluently in the course of using the language and to improve their communicative competence. From the above we can see that it is not logical to think that the grammar ability is opposed to the communicative competence.

Therefore, teachers should not ignore grammar teaching while they put CLT in the first place. We should help students to sum up the rules of grammar, and at the same time closely link them with their daily life. Meanwhile, in real or half-real language atmosphere, it is important for the English teachers to make use of all kinds of teaching ways to create the communicative practical activities among students. The idea of practicing while learning and learning from practicing will make students use language to communicate more effectively.

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