Theories Analyzing Communicative Approach in China's EFL Classes

Yang Xu

Department of English, School of Foreign Language, Tianjin Polytechnic University

No. 399 Bin Shui Xi Dao Street, Xiqing District, Tianjin 300387, China

Tel: 86-22-8395-6111   E-mail: xuyang_angela@yahoo.com.cn

Abstract

Communicative Approach is applied widely in primary and middle schools, when various modern teaching methods pour in China's EFL classes. However, the development of this effective language teaching method cannot show its advantages in China during years' practice. This paper analyzed the constraining factors, such as teaching habits, examination system, teacher's educated level and class size.

Keywords: Communicative Approach, EFL teaching method, Constraining factors

1. Introduction

With the global economic integration, learning foreign languages has been becoming a living behavior in Chinese younger generation. Therefore, more and more schools or language centers grasp this opportunity to use different EFL teaching method for developing their training market. Based on this, it impels new standard of English courses in order to pay great attention to involve the students in various class activities. The aim of the learning or teaching a language is to contribute the learners' language applied sense through encouraging them in practical activities. Nunan stated "Knowledge of grammatical structures was no guarantee of being able to use those rules for communication. Learners who are able to identify instances of rule violation, and who could even state the rule, frequently violated the rules when using language for communication." Therefore, people are focusing on Communicative Approach which almost can satisfy their expectancy.

This essay will elaborate Communicative Approach from its definition and history. Furthermore, it will evaluate this innovational approach and introduce Communicative Approach application in China in the following.

2. Definition

Margie S. Berns, an expert in the field of Communicative Approach teaching, writes that Language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)" (Berns, 1984,p.5).

During communicative activities the teacher's role will be from facilitator to monitor, usually without interruption, and then to provide feedback on the success or otherwise of the communication and, on the linguistic performance of the learners in the form of post-activity error correction. In terms of the organization of the lesson, the presentation, practice and perform model, "test, teach, test" is broken. The input of a particular structure is typically followed by controlled, less controlled and freer practice is likely to have been replaced by a more task-based approach. The learners are given a communicative task which is monitored by the teacher and then their language use while performing the task is fine-tuned by the teacher in a lesson stage which does not focus on error correction or a particular form. This is a typical model. The initial task is repeated or a similar task is performed, ideally with a greater degree of linguistic accuracy than that during the first attempt.

Compare with the traditional grammatical approach of the beginner's syllabus by presenting the special interrogative sentences introduced by "what" or "how", a more communicative with basic introductions, requests and questions enabling learners begin communicating in English from the first lesson instead. Actually, in some countries, teacher-center class is developing into students-center class. That means reducing teacher talking time to a minimum and maximizing the opportunities for communication.

3. History

Communicative Approach, as an innovation in English language teaching, emerged in Britain in the 1970s. Galloway (1993, p.1) mentioned that Communicative Approach's origins are many, in so far as one teaching methodology tends to influence the next. The communicative approach could be said to be the product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods of foreign language instruction.

Students did not know how to communicate by using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions, when they

were taught by the traditional grammatical way. In brief, they lost the ability to communicate in the culture of the language studied. Interest in and development of communicative-style teaching mushroomed in the 1970s; authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engaged in real communication with one another became quite popular.

In the intervening years, the communicative approach has been adapted to the primary, middle level has produced different teaching methods known under a variety of names, including notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction, and communicative language teaching.

4. Judgments

4.1 Advantages

Communicative Approach is an innovation with many specific characteristics. It views language as a tool for communication, and interaction speaking activities in classrooms is the instances of real communication. Most of students have sufficient exposure to the target language.

Firstly, from language teaching as a kind of knowledge teaching, a very effective way to teach ESL students is through the use of the Communicative Approach, because Communicative Approach puts the real-life situations into English teaching and learning. The teacher sets up a situation, which students are likely to encounter in their real lives by using real-life situations such as going shopping, going to the bank, buying stamps at the post office, meeting and greeting people, etc. Unlike the Grammar-Translation Approach, which relies on repetitious exercise and rules and is unnecessary to create contexts presenting the language in an unnatural way, the Communicative Approach can give students a flexible situation as to the out-come of a class exercise, which will be different among their reactions and responses, because the real-life situations change from day to day and within each conversation. Students are not only exposed to new vocabulary but also to sentential and grammatical patterns. Otherwise, the natural context is developed from the students' experiences with the language. Therefore, students' learning potential would be stimulated, because their motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. The students will have a much more varied exposure to language with communicating. They will be exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations and patterns as well as language forms.

Secondly, as language teaching is a kind of culture teaching, Communicative Approach gives students more opportunities to understand the culture of target language than other traditional approaches can. Students can easily compare the differences between their own culture and target culture when they practice the dialogue. They can feel the difference between two expressive styles through communicating. For instance, the western people prefer straightforwardness to express their thinking, but eastern characteristic is in an implicit way. Otherwise, students can learn how to use language with foreigners bravely, and then get more chance to understand the culture deeply.

4.2 Disadvantages

This type of approach tends to find a better way for building an environment which is close to our real life. Some learners find that this approach can involve their interesting at the beginning, but latter they get discontent on this teaching model in the class. The general reason is that, in today's society, people have more opportunities to make conversations with foreigners by target languages. The result would be more effectively than talking to the partner who is also language learners. There will, however, almost be an emphasis on more authentic contexts with example sentences being at the very least semi-authentic and potentially of communicative use rather than arbitrary examples of form with little or no communicative value. Otherwise, depending on the teaching syllabus, teachers must choose a lot of prescribed textbooks on listening and reading which use contrived texts designed to present grammatical form or vocabulary and with no attempt to communicate a meaningful message to the listener or reader. Perhaps the most maintaining of the communicative approach will be that it has allowed teachers to incorporate motivating and purposeful communicative activities and principles into their teaching while simultaneously retaining the best elements of other methods and approaches rather than rejecting them wholesale.

Moreover, most modern teachers would like to think that their classes are "communicative" in the widest meaning of the word. Piles of activities which learners communicate and tasks are completed by the usual interaction with other learners would be used in their classes. To this aim, there will probably be considerable if not extensive use of pair, group and mingling activities, with the emphasis on completing the task successfully through communication with others rather than on the accurate use of form.

5. Communicative Approach in China

Communicative Approach was introduced to China in the 1990s. In 1992 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) introduced a functional syllabus, in which the communicative teaching aim was set, and the communicative functions to be taught were listed. In the same year, in cooperation with the British Longman, the SEDC published a new textbook series. The syllabus and the textbooks required teachers to teach communicatively in

classrooms. (Liao, 2000) However, at the beginning, Communicative Approach was not as popular as recent in the early 1990s. Hird (1995) pointed that the ELT in China is "not very communicative. And maybe that is just as well, because China is a vastly different English language teaching environment from the one that spawned and nurtured the communicative approach."

The first reason is that "87% of teachers in China's middle schools used the traditional method in the late 1980s" (Zuo, 1990, p.40). Teachers had focused on grammar and structure for a long time. As Johnson and Morrow (1981, p.1) stated, "New movements often begin as reactions to old ones. Their origins lie in a discontent with an existing state of affairs".

The second reason to reject reform is the inability of the teachers. Chinese teachers are not English native speakers. Most of them, especially those in rural schools, are not good at using English on listening and speaking. Their low educational level and limited understanding of linguistic knowledge may restrict the development of Communicative Approach. According to the SEDC investigation, in the 1980s, the percentage of secondary school teachers with BA degrees was only 28%, 12% of whom were Russian majors and 8% of whom were graduated with a 3-year BA program during the Cultural Revolution. Teachers with associate degrees and with secondary diplomas were 4% and 29% respectively (Zuo, 1990). So poor was their higher education that many teachers took in-service training in teacher's colleges and normal universities (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

The third reason is that the Chinese Examination System puts students and teachers into an embarrassing situation. Matriculation English Test (MET) is one National College Entrance Exams developed by the SEDC. Passing it to enter colleges and universities for further education is the most important consideration for secondary students. After 1992, listening to dialogues and answering the questions, reading comprehension and compositions are added into the examination, but speaking sills is also ignored.

The forth reason is that of the class size. A typical class was in a 'home base' classroom in China. There are approximate 50 students who sit in pairs at desks arranged in rows facing the teaching in the classroom where we learned any courses. Generally, it was difficult to organize 50 students making group work in the classroom. It would be a very noisy thing.

However, these situations are changing in some big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou. Some schools are limiting their class size to about 20 students. Otherwise, the teacher's quality is improving. Most of them have B.A, M.A or overseas educational background.

6. Conclusion

Communicative Approach has witnessed almost 40 years of history. Although the approach is the closest to the natural learning, it also has some disadvantages. Especially, its advantages cannot be reflected perfectly in Chinese educational system. Many reasons, such as teaching habits, examination system, teacher's educated level and class size, are the vital issues which limit the development of Communicative Approach in China. In my opinion, there is no single teaching method which deals with everything that concerns the form, the use, and the content of the target language. Teachers need to combine the new with the old, such as the Communicative Approach with traditional teaching methods.

References

Berns, M.S. (1984). Functional approaches to language and language teaching: Another look. In S. Savignon & M.S. Berns (Eds.), *Initiatives in communicative language teaching. A book of readings*.

Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (1996). *English teaching and learning in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Galloway, Ann. (1993). Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction and Sample Activities. ERIC Digest. [Online] Available: http://www.ericdigests.org/1993/sample.htm (June, 1993)

Hird, B. (1995). How communicative can English language teaching be in China? *Prospect 10/3*. Australia

Johnson, K. & Morrow, K. (1981). *Communication in the classroom*. England: Longman Group Ltd.

Liao, X. Q. (2000). How Communicative Language Teaching Became Acceptable in Secondary Schools in China. In The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VI, No. 10, October 2000. [Online] Available: http://iteslj.org/Articles/Liao-CLTinChina.html

Zuo, H, et al. (1990). *Investigation and Analysis of China's Secondary English Teaching*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.