Adapting communicative language teaching approach to China’s context

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Abstract: The issue on which this essay focuses is how to adapt the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach to China’s context. With the recent accession to the WTO, the long-awaited Olympic games in Beijing, China has made learning English a national priority. It is very important and necessary to research on how to adapt CLT flexibly and appropriately to China’s context if most Chinese English learners are to gain a good grasp of oral English, and if specialist learning is to be achieved by those who need English for business and academic purposes. Therefore this essay is structured as follows: First, analyzing the different types of English teaching methods in China and then focusing on the CLT Method. By analyzing and contrasting these English teaching methods, the need to change the current English teaching methods in China will be discovered. Finally, it explains the problems of adopting the more modern CLT Approach and gives suggestions on how it may best be adapted to the Chinese context.

Key words: CLT Approach; China’s context; English teaching

1. Introduction

With the development of market economy, China is accelerating its steps to join the world family in commerce and cultural partnership. With the recent accession to the WTO, the long-awaited Olympic Games in Beijing, China has made learning English a national priority. English, with its unique status, has been taught in China for more than 100 years. Today, English is becoming more and more popular. It is a compulsory course for all Chinese students from primary school to university.

Clearly it is relatively easy to demonstrate the importance of English in current China. This essay intends to argue that to achieve success in English learning for Chinese students the methods of teaching must be reconsidered. Therefore this article is structured as follows: First, analyzing different types of English teaching methods in China and then focusing on the CLT Method. By analyzing and contrasting these English teaching methods, the need to change current English teaching methods in China will be discovered. Finally, explaining the problems of adopting the more modern CLT Approach and giving suggestions on how it may best be adapted to the Chinese context.

2. A Brief Introduction to English Teaching Methods in China

2.1 Grammar-Translation Method

English has been taught in China for more than 100 years. In the beginning stage, people did not have any experience on modern language teaching and learning, so they followed a European language teaching method.
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which is used in teaching Greek and Latin in Middle Ages in Europe—Grammar-Translation Method. Some Chinese students become accustomed to this method in learning English and generally showed great interest in language structures and linguistic details. Most of them believe “we would like to know what happens, because if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively” (Harvey, 1985). Therefore, most Chinese English teachers always stick to this method, and think it is essential to analyze grammar to learners, without considering the age of the students or their English proficiency.

This method is effective and suitable for some Chinese students, but not all of them. The outcome of this method is that students develop poor oral English ability with pronunciation and intonation not standard. Although they have learned lots of grammar rules, when using English to communicate, they will make grammatical mistakes frequently. Especially when they are in foreign countries, they cannot ask the way; they cannot order taxi. They are “observers” rather than active participants in classes. Students became almost “structurally competent but communicatively incompetent” (Johnson & Morrow, 1981). It has been pointed out that this grammar-oriented approach reflects an artificial and formalistic view of language skills and learning. It doesn’t allow the learners to use a language in a natural way (Widdowson, 1990). This is the most serious problem in Grammar-Translation Method and also in current China’s English teaching.

2.2 Direct Method

This English teaching method is totally different from Grammar-Translation Method. It uses English directly in teaching, such as using English to make conversations or have discussions. Students’ English competence is developed in this way instead of using mother tongue to translate. The basic principle of this method is that the foreign language learning process should be like the natural process of a child learning his or her mother tongue. It believes that language is a skill or habit, and this habit can be achieved by repetition and imitation.

Although this method can inspire students’ interests in learning English and is in favour of their English pronunciation and intonation, it has certain limitations: (1) It only focuses on experiences and perceptual knowledge in English and it has little estimate on students’ level of consciousness. (2) This method rejects mother tongue in English teaching. It only sees the disadvantages of mother tongue, but never makes use of mother tongue to facilitate students’ comprehension. (3) After learning English for a long time, some students may understand simple oral English but not complicated sentences and have poor grammar skills. (4) The class size should be small in using this method. So this method is just suitable to teach English beginners, and cannot be fully applied in the large country—China.

2.3 Audio-Lingual Approach

This English teaching method puts listening and speaking in the first place. It uses sentence pattern as the base of teaching and tries to avoid mother tongue in class. When using this method in learning English, students should first listen and then speak. After a long time practice, students can automatically express what they had heard.

Because this method relies on repetition and drills, the main limitations are: (1) It over emphasizes the mechanical practice and ignores students’ English skills training and learning flexibility. (2) This method focuses too much on the language structure and ignores the meaning of the language, so students’ reading and writing abilities are poor.

2.4 Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT)

In the early 1990s, a new English teaching method was introduced to China—Communicative Language Teaching Approach. This method emphasizes how to use language as a media to communicate. Teachers should not only train students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, but also train them how to use all of these language skills into the real life communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to
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encounter in real life. The CLT can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a class exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses (Galloway, 1993).

The basic features of CLT are: (1) It focuses on students' active participation, the whole classroom is not the teacher-centered, but students-centered one. The teacher should give students enough time to practise during class. (2) The English teacher should help students to be more independent, active and fluent in using English. In real life situation, students will use the language without teacher's help. (3) When using the CLT, the teacher often organizes pair and group work, the whole classroom setting should be arranged in favour of these activities. Although this method is quite useful and can inspire students' interest, it still has some limitations: (1) The textbook using in CLT breaks up the English grammatical system, which increases students' difficulty in learning grammar. (2) This method is hard to assess.

The above four English teaching methods are all used in China in different time and to a certain extent; they have their own features and focuses on improving different language skills. So the limitations are unavoidable when we use them separately in English teaching. Among them, the oldest language teaching method—Grammar-Translation Method is still popular in some places in current China. Meanwhile, for various reasons, using the CLT in China met considerable difficulties. How to use the CLT in China's English teaching context properly still has a long way to go.

3. Adapting Communicative Language Teaching Approach in China

To solve this problem, we need to use the CLT flexibly, that is to say, we need to adapt CLT to China's English teaching context. But just as Johnson and Morrow (1981, p. 1) state “new movements often begin as reactions to old ones. Their origins lie in a discontent with an existing state of affairs”. In fact, 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. This action met considerable resistance at that time.

3.1 Problems

The main problems of adopting CLT in China are: First, class size. In China, each class has at least 50 students, and there are only 45 minutes in one English class. Each student could potentially speak in each class less than 1 minute. So it is impossible for English teachers to conduct CLT well in this kind of class. Second, English teachers especially some primary and secondary school English teachers lack sufficient English knowledge and teaching skills to adopt CLT without further guidance and training. “Many teachers have tried to change the dominant teaching procedures but quickly get frustrated, lose their initial enthusiasm, and acquiesce to tradition”. (Campbell & ZHAO, 1993) Third, in China the whole process of English teaching and learning is heavily influenced by examinations, and the matriculation English test focuses on students' linguistic competence. The English teaching pattern in China is textbook-based, teacher-dominated and test-oriented, which prevents students from improving their communicative competence (ZUO, 1993). Finally, lack of teaching materials is another obstacle to adopt CLT in China. Right now, some universities in China stick to their own textbooks—College English, which was published in 1989 by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, and has remained unchanged for more than 10 years. College English does include some authentic materials from English novels and magazines, but it lacks practical applications and is hard to organize communicative classroom activities to go with it.

Because of the above reasons, English teachers cannot adopt CLT directly in China's context, and the history
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has already proved that direct adoption would fail at last. They must adapt CLT and use an eclectic method according to China's current situation.

3.2 Factors to be considered of adapting CLT to China's context

The above four English teaching methods are all used in China's English teaching. They have their own advantages and disadvantages. Previous research and analysis show that the most scientific way to teach English in China's context is to combine those different English teaching methods together, using an eclectic method. An eclectic method is a method that accepts the best teaching techniques from other methods according to the actual situation. To reconcile communicative approaches to the teaching of English with traditional Chinese methods helped English teachers in their teaching, but to be eclectic, teachers were required to use CLT as a method while accepting elements of the traditional methods, especially the Grammar-Translation Method.

3.2.1 Combining accuracy and fluency in China's English teaching

In English learning, accuracy and fluency are two equally important factors, but in China, accuracy is emphasized more than fluency. Chinese students are keenly interested in the exact words, have a low tolerance of ambiguity, and tend to focus on discrete grammar points and specific syntactic constructions (Bamhouse, 1981). Modern society needs students use English not only accurately but also fluently, so more attention should be paid to fluency in the future's English teaching. As for teaching beginners, a solid foundation of English must be emphasized, which is primarily built on accuracy, so English teachers should use Grammar-Translation Method more in this stage. Then teachers should encourage students to use English orally with as few errors as possible, and to manipulate the language system as spontaneously and flexibly as possible. CLT is largely involved in this process. After students have mastered the language forms, they ought to be given intensive fluency practice, because although linguistic competence is the basis of communicative competence, communicative competence does not automatically result from linguistic competence (DUAN, 1992). At this stage, English teachers should not interrupt students' practice to correct their mistakes frequently, but at the end of each fluency practice, the teacher should let students aware their mistakes, so they can avoid next time. During the whole practice, the teacher should let students use English extensively and limit the use of Chinese. Through this way, accuracy and fluency can be achieved and students' English linguistic competence and communicative competence can both be developed.

3.2.2 Student-centered orientation

For a long time, China's English classroom is dominated by teachers. They always stand in front of the blackboard, and talk all the time; students sitting in lines separately to listen. This kind of classroom setting is in favour of using Grammar-Translation Method in teaching, but it is not convenient to carry out students' practice. In order to facilitate English acquisition, students need oral practice in English classroom. Teachers must ensure that classroom interactions are managed, not just by the teacher, but by all participants. To achieve this, teachers should arrange the desks in such a way that the students can look directly at one another to help create interactions among students.

3.2.3 Teacher's role

Instead of being the master of the class, the English teacher could act as an independent participant and facilitator in English classroom. He or she facilitates the communicative process among all learners and between students and various tasks. He or she can give guidance and advice when necessary. But this does not mean in the teaching process, the teacher should only be a passive observer. Although the teacher may be nondirective in general, it is still the teacher's responsibility to recognize the distinctive qualities in the students (HAN, 1979) and to help students develop those qualities.

Of course, to perform these roles well, English teachers in China need further guidance and training to let
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them fully understand that teaching English does not consist only of teaching grammar but that the true mastery of a language involves communicative competence, and to let them know how to use CLT in their daily teaching process successfully.

3.2.4 Classroom activities

Classroom activities such as role-play, pair work and group discussion should be largely involved in English teaching. At the same time, teachers can also use any unexpected occurrence that happens during class. I still remember when I was in secondary school, I was always attracted easily by outside sights and noises. Once in an English class, I saw a very beautiful butterfly flying outside the window. It was so beautiful that I signaled my best friend to look at it. Just at this moment, my English teacher also noticed my signal. Instead of being angry, she asked the whole class to enjoy the beautiful butterfly, and me to describe it in English. Although in China, classroom activities are usually based on textbooks; English teachers can try to create activities to provide students with speaking opportunities and motivate them.

3.2.5 Changes in English test

For a long time, English examinations in China did not have oral test and the language use section. Recently, some important English tests in China developed by the State Education Development Commission began to include the language use section. English teachers can teach to the test from now on. The section was added to measure the four English language skills used for communication and it included such elements like: role-play, reading comprehension and communicative writing. Most of my students in China told me that the English examination is more interesting than ever before and they like these changes.

4. Conclusion

English teaching in China, with its traditional setting and current situation, differs from many English speaking countries. But this does not mean that the CLT approach is not applicable in China’s context. On the other hand, English teachers can use an eclectic method according to their actual situations. Adapting the CLT approach, making full use of its advantages and reconciling it with the traditional Grammar-Teaching Method, this approach can work the most effectively in China. But adapting CLT to China’s context is a very complicated process, under the guidance of the SEDC, the representatives of the central government, it should be done step by step. Right now what English teachers in China need to do is to modernize, not westernize, English teaching.

References:

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