

A Literature Review of Communicative Language Teaching: Effectiveness and Deficiencies

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching is an important foreign language teaching theory and approach worldwide, and it is the mainstream idea and theoretical root of foreign language teaching. The purpose of this paper is to review the theoretical research and practical measures of the Communicative Approach at home and abroad, to find the advantages and shortcomings of the Communicative Language Teaching, and to put forward own viewpoints on the problems existing in the research of the Communicative Approach. At the same time, it explores how the Communicative Language Teaching can be based on the reality of English teaching in China and find the future development trend.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching; Communicative Approach; Communicative Competence; Communicative Teaching Practices.

1. Introduction

Emerging in Britain in the early 1970s, the Communicative Language Teaching is a foreign language teaching method designed to cultivate learners' communicative competence. Over the past 30 years, the Communicative Approach has developed into a foreign language teaching theory and methodology on a world scale. It has also become a basic principle that is generally recognized and accepted by the field of foreign language teaching all over the world today (Wang, 1996). It has been emphasized by English language researchers and educators since it was introduced to China in the late 1970s. In the past 20 years, researchers at home and abroad have conducted more in-depth studies on the Communicative Language Teaching, which further enriched and improved the theoretical basis and practical significance of the Communicative Approach. Meanwhile, researchers, educators and teachers explored the principles of application and practical paths of the Communicative Approach. However, due to the influence of factors such as time, different region and cultural background, how the Communicative Language Teaching can be effectively used in the domestic English classroom has always been an issue worthy of continuous exploration and investigation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Studies of Communicative Approach

In foreign countries, some scholars were the first to study the Communicative Language Teaching in the late 1960s. The reason is that British applied linguists began to call into question the effectiveness of Situational Language Teaching. The theoretical basis of the Communicative Approach stems from Chomsky's (1957) theory of language application. Besides, the theoretical foundation of Communicative Approach also comes from the following three aspects: firstly, Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence; secondly, Wilkins' theory of linguistic notions and function; and thirdly, Halliday's (1995) theory of functional linguistics. These three theories can be said to be the fulcrum on which the communicative

approach is built. Since then, Howatt (1984) and others have further improved the communicative concepts and theories, marking the rapid development and gradual improvement of the Communicative Language Teaching.

In the classic book *Syntactic Structure*, Chomsky (1957) proposed “linguistic competence” as a set of internalized linguistic rules from the native language. Meanwhile, the current structural theories cannot guarantee the uniqueness and creativity of individual sentences. However, his viewpoints have been challenged by other scholars.

Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence in his study as the use of one’s underlying linguistic knowledge and competence. Communicative competence mainly includes the following aspects: (1) formally possible; (2) appropriate; (3) implementation available; and (4) actually performed. Although this theory has greatly advanced the updating of foreign language teaching theory, it is not perfect.

Later, Canale and Swain (1980) optimized the communicative competence, including the following four dimensions: (1) grammatical competence; (2) sociolinguistic competence; (3) discourse competence; (4) strategic competence.

In *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday (1995) proposed the concepts of conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse as the three “purely rational functions” that powerfully complement Hymes’s view of communicative competence, which is the most influential and widely accepted interpretation of the concept of communicative competence.

In China, research on Communicative Language Teaching has begun since the late 1970s. Its concept has been greatly accepted in the domestic academic circles, and many scholars have tried to localize and transform foreign communicative teaching theories to be widely used in English classroom teaching in China.

In the essay *The First Exploration of Communicative Approach*, Hu Wenzhong (1982) explained the concepts and characteristics of Communicative Approach, pointing out that teachers must know how to use communicative pedagogy in the classroom. However, Zhang Qianzhong (1982) pointed out that the current practice of teaching English in secondary schools in China seldom applied the Communicative Language Teaching, based on which he explained the importance and necessity of applying the Communicative Approach to English teaching.

By writing the book *Communicative English Course*, Li Xiaojun (1987) combined the advanced teaching concepts embedded in the Communicative Approach with the reality of English teaching in China. In her book, Li mentioned that communicative competence can include three dimensions: language knowledge, language skills and practical competence.

Li Yujun (2001) considered that the Communicative Approach, as one of the many foreign language teaching methods, is not the only choice for cultivating communicative competence in a foreign language. In foreign language teaching, the following aspects must be dealt with in the light of China’s actual situation: (1) grammatical principle; (2) communicative principle; (3) cultural principle. Comparative analysis should be used to make students understand the cultural background of different languages, learn the communication patterns of different cultures, and enhance the cross-cultural awareness of language use (Shu & Zhuang, 1996).

2.2. Practical Studies of Communicative Approach

In addition to theoretical studies, research on the Communicative Approach includes a practical dimension. It has also been studied in depth by scholars both inside and outside the country.

Practical studies mean that researchers explore how to apply Communicative Language Teaching into specific English teaching. Littlewood (1981) stated that one of the most obvious features of Communicative Language Teaching is that the Communicative Approach focuses not only on the structure of language, but also on its function, which actually refers to the teaching

process. According to Halliday(1978), language is an important support for communicative teaching and learning, and speaking is in a dominant position in language. Thus, it is vital for students to practice speaking when learning English. Only in this way can they master and apply the relevant language rules to realize the purpose of communication. Widdowson (1998)believed that in Communicative Language Teaching, teachers must take into account students' familiar living environment, cultural background and things that can arouse students' interest. At the same time, teaching should be based on students' interests and needs.

In China, many researchers have conducted more comprehensive studies about how to put Communicative Language Teaching into practice.

In terms of vocabulary teaching, Dong Yanping(2001)believed that Communicative Approach promotes indirect learning of vocabulary and does not favor the learning of purely linguistic forms out of communicative situations. As a result, a communicative English teaching experiment was carried out, and it was found that the addition of direct learning to the indirect learning of the communicative approach helped the output ability of learners' vocabulary.

In terms of speaking teaching, Tian Xingbin (2018) put forward the idea of optimizing oral communicative teaching, thinking that teachers should organize and carry out rich and diversified extracurricular activities of speaking, especially activities such as situational drama performance can be organized, so as to mobilize the students' willingness to communicate, and promote the cultivation of their communicative competence.

In terms of listening and speaking teaching, Zou Yibing (2018) used the Communicative Approach to conduct classroom experiments and carry out listening and teaching. The study shows that the communicative method truly advocates student-centeredness and creates opportunities for students to cooperate, communicate, discuss and display, which promotes students' learning ability and communication ability. Therefore, it meets the requirements of the new curriculum reform and the direction of educational development.

In other aspects, Hu Xiaoyi and Hu Haijian (2019) pointed out that activity teaching and contextualized teaching are the explicit and implicit paths of Communicative Approach. Besides, they explored the strategies of applying Communicative Approach to teaching.

2.3. Summary of the Current Studies

In general, the research on the Communicative Language Teaching is more in-depth both at home and abroad. Foreign research on this pedagogy started much earlier and pioneered the most fundamental theoretical system of Communicative Approach earlier. Domestic researchers, on the other hand, have enriched the theoretical connotation of the Communicative Approach by combining it with the actual situation of local English teaching and tried to apply the approach to practice, which has achieved certain teaching results. However, the Communicative Approach itself is not an absolutely perfect teaching method, and there are still some shortcomings and deficiencies.

3. Reflection and Discussion

3.1. Deficiencies in Current Research on Communicative Approach

Firstly, the research on Communicative Language Teaching is too broad or generalized, which lacks focus and does not have an absolutely comprehensive theoretical system. Most researchers explore the problems and difficulties in the implementation of Communicative Approach in foreign language teaching on the basis of approval, but do not give specific and feasible theoretical implementation suggestions. In addition, this approach under the influence of European and American sociolinguistics and constructivism inevitably carry their limitations and one-sidedness (Han, 1999).

Secondly, there is insufficient research on the classroom practice of Communicative Language Teaching. Although the theoretical research on this approach is relatively rich, and some scholars have studied how to apply it to speaking, listening, vocabulary teaching, etc., it still lacks the depth and breadth of practical research, and fails to form a model of communicative teaching that can be popularized. In addition, the only applied research has not fully taken into account the differences in the communicative competence of students in different regions and school years.

Thirdly, the Communicative Language Teaching prioritizes the cultivation of communicative competence and to some extent ignores the context of language teaching. The approach emphasizes the need for all teaching activities to serve the overall goal of developing communicative competence. Bax (2004), on the other hand, argues that this attitude is having a negative impact on language teaching. In other words, in language teaching, the goals and methods are secondary and the teaching environment or context is the first (Zhang, 2006). The notion of the Communicative Approach is the opposite, which is contrary to modern theories of language teaching.

3.2. Future Trends in Communicative Approach

It can be concluded from the summarization of the current status of research on Communicative Approach that the main trend in the future development of this approach is to construct a communicative teaching path characterized by language teaching contexts and activities. It needs to be integrated with the pragmatic rules because human speech behavior must adhere to basic rules of pragmatics in order to facilitate people's communication with each other (Sun, 2007). In addition, the following points should be noted.

Firstly, further practical research on Communicative Language Teaching. Practical research mainly refers to the use of Communicative Approach for teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing. Practical research needs to contain sufficient practical steps, research methods and so on. Relevant innovative research can also be carried out to form a specific model of communicative teaching to be used in teaching in various regions and school levels.

Secondly, the theoretical connotation of Communicative Approach should be deeply embodied in the formulation of China's foreign language syllabus and the preparation of teaching materials, rather than remaining on the surface only. The theoretical system of Communicative Approach should be updated in time to keep pace with the times. For example, in the new curriculum standard, examples are given to show how to use the Communicative Approach to teach students to speak, and effective operational strategies are proposed. Meanwhile, the purpose of the approach is to develop pragmatic competence, and the focus is on teaching pragmatic knowledge (He, 2016).

Thirdly, take the local culture as the basis and try to promote the integration, complementarity and development of Communicative Approach and culture. The wide application of Communicative Approach in foreign language teaching does not mean the total rejection of traditional teaching methods. On the contrary, traditional culture and traditional teaching methods should be emphasized, and the advantages of them should be integrated to jointly promote the integration, complementarity and development of communicative pedagogy from the cultural perspective (Hu & Hu, 2019).

4. Conclusion

By reviewing the current status of theoretical and practical research on Communicative Language Teaching at home and abroad, this paper summarizes the current problems of this approach and the aspects that need further research in the future. In specific teaching, the Communicative Approach emphasizes the meaning and communicative function of language,

authentic language materials and situations, and fluency in language use. In fact, no pedagogy is absolutely perfect. The Communicative Approach, as one of the many foreign language teaching methods, is not the only choice for developing communicative competence in a foreign language. Therefore researchers or teachers should consider and apply the Communicative Approach dialectically.

In addition, due to the influence of cultural background and other factors, the application of the Communicative Approach in different regions needs to make certain adjustments. In a word, the research on Communicative Approach should be continued with the background of the times in order to build a communicative teaching method that meets the actual needs of foreign language teaching in China.

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