

ADAPTING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING TO GRAMMAR  
TEACHING IN CHINA'S UNIVERSITY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Approved by Richard Garrett

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ADAPTING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING TO GRAMMAR  
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Dai Ming (Christina)

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## Abstract

# ADAPTING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING TO GRAMMAR TEACHING IN CHINA'S UNIVERSITY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Dai Ming (Christina)

Under the Supervision of Professor Richard Garrett, Doctor

The purpose of foreign language teaching is to develop the learner's communicative competence. As the base of a certain language, grammar plays an indispensable role in English language teaching (ELT). However, in Chinese traditional education, teachers focus too much on English grammar explanation, pattern exercises and recitation of English rules. Thus, most students view grammar as the most boring course.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an innovation in ELT. Hymes's "communicative competence" is considered as one of the theoretical tenets of CLT. At the beginning of 1970s, people usually called this teaching method the "Notional Approach" or "Functional Approach". It has influenced Chinese foreign language teaching greatly and has been vigorously promoted by quite a number of English teachers.

After analyzing these issues, I will demonstrate that integrating grammar teaching with the communicative approach can make the grammar teaching more interesting and appealing and thus improve the students' ability to use the language.

**Keywords:** ELT, CLT, communicative competence

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
APPROVAL PAGE.....	i
TITLE PAGE.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT PAGE.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction	
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Delimitations	
Method of Approach	
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	4
The Goal of English Language Teaching (ELT)	
A Brief Introduction to English Teaching Methods in China	
The Origin and Development of CLT	
Features and Principles of CLT	
How to Conduct Classroom Activities by Adopting CLT	
Summary	
CHAPTER III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	16
REFERENCES .....	19

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In China, the ever-growing demand for English has created a huge demand for quality language teaching. English Language Teaching (ELT) should be in accord with the need of English study, which should be in accord with what people do after mastering that language. Many linguists have argued that the ultimate purpose of ELT is intercultural communication. With more and more international contacts, it is vital for English teachers in China to foster the learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Language is the most important means of communication. As the base of a certain language, grammar plays an indispensable role in ELT. As Cook (2000) says, "Knowledge of grammar is considered by many linguists to be the central area of the language system around which the other areas such as pronunciation and vocabulary revolve" (p.14). However, in Chinese traditional education, teachers focus too much on English grammar explanation, pattern exercises and recitation of English rules. Thus, most students perceived grammar as the most boring course. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an innovation in ELT. Richards (2007) argues, "One of the goals of Communicative Language Teaching is to develop fluency in language use" (p.16).

After analyzing these issues, I will demonstrate that integrating grammar teaching with the communicative approach can make the grammar teaching more

interesting and appealing and thus improve the students' ability to use language.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed is, "How to adapt Communicative Language Teaching to Grammar Teaching in China's university English classroom?"

### **Definition of Terms**

Communicative Language Teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom (Richards, 2007).

Intercultural Communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture (Samovar, 2000).

ELT. Abbreviation for the term English Language Teaching

CLT. Abbreviation for the term Communicative Language Teaching

### **Delimitations of Research**

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over a sixty (60) day period. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics will

include “Communicative Language Teaching”, “Grammar Teaching”, and “English Language Teaching”.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on the English teaching methods employed in China will be conducted. A second review of literature relates the origin, main features, and principles of CLT. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will be made.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **The Goal of English Language Teaching (ELT)**

The ever-growing demand for English has created a huge demand for quality language teaching. In order to meet this demand, teachers of English have been required to use the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in the classroom (Chowdhury & Ha, 2008). ELT should be in accord with the need of English study, which should be in accord with what people do after mastering that language. Then, what is the goal of ELT? Many linguists have argued that the ultimate purpose of ELT is intercultural communication. With more and more international contacts, it is vital for language teachers in China to foster learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Thus, what is intercultural communication? While a native language is for the communication within a country, a foreign language is crucial in cross-cultural communication which occurs between two different countries. Samovar (2000) states that the intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. However, there are other kinds of intercultural communication. When the foreign language is only of the country's mother tongue, which means besides this country, no other countries use it, for example, Japanese, it is used in the communication just within that country. So if people of other countries want to communicate with Japanese, they should find a medium to convey their meanings. If the language is the native language of more than

one country, for example, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, or Russian, it is used in the communication not only with those countries but also as the international language with people from many other countries who know the language. All the communicative activities mentioned above are intercultural communications.

### **A Brief Introduction to English Teaching Methods in China**

In China, there is a long history of foreign language teaching and both Chinese parents and Chinese educators always attach much emphasis on English education. Nowadays, China has become a country which has the most English learners in the world. “It is a compulsory course for all Chinese students from primary school to university” (Ye, 2007, p. 29). It is estimated that the number of English learners in basic education period is about 200 million. In order to provide more competent English users, implementation of effective teaching methods in class is essential for all English teachers. English was first taught in China in the 1800s (Bolton, 2002). With the development of English education, four kinds of teaching method have been popular in China in different times. The Grammar-Translation Method has been widely adopted in the beginning stage. This teaching method has been firstly used in teaching Greek and Latin in Middle Ages in Europe. Being lack of teaching experience, most Chinese Educators followed this method (Ye, 2007,p.29). The Direct Method has been popular in China at the end of 1980s. This teaching method emphasizes repetition and imitation and it insists that learning language should be a natural process just like babies learning their mother languages. During this period, another teaching method was also introduced to China—the Audio-Lingual Method.

This teaching method takes highly of listening and speaking. In the early 1990s, CLT has enjoyed popularity and to a certain extent in China. Among them, the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method are two traditional pedagogies, which have been regarded as the most widely used teaching methods in China. Traditional pedagogy focuses on the knowledge of English and ignores its communicative functions. This makes English learners unable to use English in real situations, even if they have learned for more than ten years (Liu, Yu, Shu, & Zhang, 2005). This tendency has also been seen in the West. Nunan (2001) says:

Language was seen as a unified system, and the ultimate aim of the learner was to approach the target language norms of the ‘native speaker’. The priority for learners was to master the structures of the language, and, in this process, considerations of meaning were seen almost as peripheral. (p.9)

In the traditional English class, teachers generally think that mastering a language means mastering its grammar (Chen, 2003). So they instruct English grammar in detail. They spend most of their time analyzing the structure of isolated sentences and distributing lots of exercises for students. Many students perceive grammar as the most boring course that they have been forced to learn in school.

Although the traditional grammar class has been labeled by students as the most trivial and boring class, language learners must not neglect its basic and essential function. As Cook (2000) says:

Knowledge of grammar is considered by many linguists to be the central area of the language system around which the other areas such as pronunciation and

vocabulary revolve. However important the other components of language may be in themselves, they are connected to each other through grammar. Grammar is often called the ‘computational system’ that relates sound and meaning, trivial in itself but impossible to manage without. (p.14)

All languages have grammar. In view of this, nobody can escape from grammar. If he or she communicates with others, proper grammar is the priority of expressing oneself clearly. As foreign language teachers, how could we improve the boring traditional way of teaching grammar? Adapting CLT to grammar teaching will be a better choice.

### **The Origin and Development of CLT**

CLT began to emerge during the 1970s. It is a new approach to language teaching after the Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, and Audio-Lingual Method. It was proposed by applied linguists who negated the teaching theory of structuralism. At the beginning, people usually called this teaching method the “Notional Approach” or “Functional Approach”. CLT has been influenced by sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophy of language, anthropology, sociology and some other disciplines, among which, sociolinguistics has had the most impact on it. Richards (2007) argues that, “Communicative Language Teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom” (p.2). CLT emphasizes that the aim of language teaching is to develop the learner’s communicative competence. The notion

of “communicative competence” was proposed by American sociolinguist Hymes (1972) during the 1970s and it is considered as the theoretical tenet of CLT. Communicative competence was proposed in contrast to Chomsky’s theory of “linguistic competence”. Chomsky’s linguistic competence could be easily understood as the grammatical knowledge of a language (Wang, 2006). Whereas, Hymes pointed out that language competence not only refers to the understanding of grammar, it also includes the following four aspects: formally possible, psychologically feasible, contextually appropriate, and actually performed (Hymes, 1972). It can be compared with the concept of grammatical competence. Another linguist, Richards (2007) argues:

Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge we have of a language that accounts for our ability to produce sentences in a language. It refers to knowledge of the building blocks of sentences (e.g. parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) and how sentences are formed. (p.2)

At the beginning of the 1980s, the theory of communicative competence was complemented by two Canadian linguists, Canale and Swain (1980). They argued that communicative competence contains grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (1980). During the 1990’s, Bachman (1990), an American sociolinguist, developed this theory further. Later, Savignon studied the previous research and emphasized that language teaching should consider the learner’s communicative needs and put the learner in the central place (2002).

Since CLT was introduced to China in the early 1990s, it has influenced Chinese foreign language teaching greatly and has been vigorously promoted by quite a number of English teachers. Its adoption reflects the dissatisfaction with the traditional pedagogy (Yu, 2001). The Grammar-Translation Method, a traditional teaching approach, is structure-based. It places grammatical knowledge first and pays less attention to the training of listening and speaking. As a result, learners develop poor oral English ability and become “deaf and dumb”, that is, so-called “Mute English” (Peng, 2008).

Although CLT has become the dominant approach in ELT in China, some problems indeed exist in the research and adopting of this teaching method. The ideas toward the theory and the research methods are the most obvious problems that should be solved (Li, 2001). However, with the development of teaching, China’s educators have become much more interested in language as it is used in communication. Cultivating learners’ communicative competence has become the requirement of China’s ELT.

### **Features and Principles of CLT**

CLT has its own distinct features. It encourages task-based learning and lays great stress on language functions. In consideration of learners’ needs, language teachers should select teaching materials as authentic as possible and design enough activities simulating real life in the classroom. The adoption of CLT could be regarded as a part of the teaching innovation process. “Teachers mould innovations to their own abilities, beliefs and experiences; the immediate school context; and the

wider sociocultural environment” (Carless, 2004, as cited in Littlewood, 2007, p. 244). The learner’s task is not only to master the knowledge, but also put the knowledge into practice. For this purpose, they should actively take part in the classroom activities. Through being involved in those activities, teachers and students will make clear whether the knowledge has been mastered or not.

**CLT includes three main principles.**

Firstly, the primary principle is that CLT seeks to promote or lead to the teaching and learning of language use in communication. That means teachers should teach English for communicative purposes. The increased interest in taking English as a communicative tool could be observed from the organization of language teaching (Liu & Wen, 2005). Any types of classroom activities are designed for helping teachers to fulfill the goal. Take teaching sentence structure, for example. In the grammar class, if teachers teach a certain type of sentence structure simply because it is part of the grammatical system or it is the required task in the syllabus, this teaching process is just for the language itself. On the contrary, if the sentence structure teaching meets learners’ communicative needs, they can instantly apply what they have learned to ask questions or describe something to other people. From this perspective, teachers who instruct the knowledge that can meet learners’ needs do teach for communication. Meanwhile, the teaching itself also becomes communicative.

In overall actual classroom teaching, grammar instruction takes a larger part of a class. Teachers spend much time in “grammar explanations, chorus reading, and

vocabulary presentations” (Sakui, 2004). Most language learners have the idea that traditional grammar instruction is so boring that it is very hard for them to concentrate on the class all the time. Application of the communicative teaching method in grammar classes will greatly change this situation. After finishing the theory instruction, teachers can give a context in daily life, and invite couples of students with what they have learned to make dialogues in the classroom. By practicing in a given context, it is much easier for students to totally understand the knowledge they have acquired.

Secondly, teachers ought to conduct classroom activities in the context of the real world as much as possible. As Clarke and Silbertstein (1977) thus argued, “classroom activities should parallel the ‘real world’ as closely as possible. Since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the message and not the medium”.

In the real world, when people communicate with others, the forms of expression and words that they choose are varied. For this, how do teachers design the classroom activities to mirror the real world? It is known that even if the forms of communication are varied, there are some common features existing in daily communications of different people. These common features are what CLT emphasizes. They are also what the teachers want to show to their students. Generally speaking, these communicative features can be summarized into three points: information gap, free choices, and information feedback.

Information gap refers to “the fact that in real communication people normally

communicate in order to get information they do not possess” (Richards, 2007). Free choice means people can choose the form and content of communication by themselves. As for information feedback, it refers to people adjusting their communicative content according to the information that other people provide (Xu, 2000).

The third principle of CLT is that teachers do not always correct errors. That means fluency and appropriateness in ELT should take precedence over structural correctness (Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, & Son, 2007). This is another notable feature of CLT.

It is clear that CLT places emphasis on the transmission of meanings, selection of words and realization of communicative purposes. “One of the goals of Communicative Language Teaching is to develop fluency in language use” (Richards, 2007, P.16). However, it is normal that students are confused with some new vocabulary or grammar usages during the communicative activities. In order to make themselves better understood, they usually use some improper vocabulary or sentence patterns to convey their meanings. This must run counter to the “accuracy” principle, which has been highly praised by the traditional teaching method. Teachers who stand up for the communicative teaching method may disagree with pointing out students’ mistakes all the time in the process of communication. They believe that students may be frustrated by too many corrections. However, it doesn’t mean ignoring the mistakes. Richards (2007) pointed out that:

Accuracy work could either come before or after fluency work. For example,

based on students' performance on a fluent task, the teacher could assign accuracy work to deal with grammatical or pronunciation problems the teacher observed while students were carrying out the task. (p.18)

### **How to Conduct Classroom Activities by Adopting CLT**

“Perhaps the majority of language teachers today, when asked to identify the methodology they employ in their classrooms, identify ‘communicative’ as the methodology of choice” (Richards, 2007, p.1). Then, how do English teachers design classroom activities to change the boring atmosphere of traditional grammar class by adopting the communicative method? Richards recommends two commonly used types in his book.

In the first instance, role-play is a kind of activity that requires participants to “behave in the way somebody else would behave in a particular situation” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, 6<sup>th</sup> edition). Teachers can choose any context of daily life. Meanwhile, each participant will have two cards—one is the role card, which tells the participant the personal information about the role, such as age, career, family, or hobbies. The other one is the cue card, which describes the situation and general content of the communication. Students who take part in the role-play activity should fully complement the language of the communication, and try their best to make a dialogue suitable for the requirement with their partners.

Nunan (2001) said that “role plays help to make the task-based classroom a lively and rich language environment for learners of all abilities” (p.84). In this process, students will put what they have learned into practice and teachers can get

clear about how much knowledge the students have mastered or which parts need to be paid more attention to in the future.

The second type of activity is group discussion. Just as its name implies, group discussion is students in groups who “ become skilled at cooperating with others, and express their own opinions, ideas, and feelings, guided by the teacher” (Nunan, 2001, p.83). Nunan also pointed out that in group discussion, students “learn how to solve language problems in a systematic way and to decide what language to use in the different situations that their teachers present in the classroom” (p. 84).

In grammar class, after instructing the theory, the teacher can divide all the students into several groups. Four or five students work in a group to discuss the usage of the grammar that the teacher instructed in the class. Group discussion can help students solve problem by themselves and also improve their oral language abilities. In a sense, any oral expression contains many aspects of grammar, such as the tense, voice, and sentence patterns. The oral expression is a process in which one should properly integrate all kinds of grammar to make their speech understandable. In view of this, it is easier for teachers to find out what knowledge should be focused on in their later teaching.

Implementation of CLT in the classroom also means teachers and students will witness a shift in their roles. CLT advocates student-centered teaching. Students are no longer passively receiving knowledge, but actively participating in classroom activities. Teachers in the classroom play different roles. They are no longer the master of the class. Now they act as facilitators, organizers, participators, and

investigators (Wang, 2009).

### **Summary**

In summary, all languages have their own grammar. As an important aspect, grammar acts as a basic and necessary part of a certain language. Early in the 1800s, Cobbett (1819) argued that:

Grammar...teaches us how to make use of words; that is to say, it teaches us how to make use of them in the proper manner...to be able to choose the words which ought to be placed, we must be acquainted with certain principles and rules constitute what is called Grammar.

As discussed earlier, the ultimate purpose of language teaching lies in communication. Therefore, language teachers are required to apply CLT to the traditional grammar class in an effort to get a satisfactory effect of teaching. They should design enough classroom activities simulating the real world, with the aim of developing students' communicative competence. On one hand, teachers make the most of these activities to show how the rules function in real context; on the other hand, students should actively take part in these classroom activities putting what they have learned into practice. After all, intercultural communication is the final goal. Adapting CLT to grammar teaching is indeed a better way of truly internalizing rules of grammar for language learners.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the review of existing literature related to the topic, it is clear that as the base of English, grammar occupies an indispensable place in ELT. However, the traditional teaching method pays more attention to the grammatical knowledge of English and ignores its communicative function. With the development of market economy, China has taken an important place in the world and established more and more tight connections with other countries. For speeding up the development, China should know more about the technology and cultures of other countries. Meanwhile, it is necessary for China to introduce itself to the world. In order to meet the ever-growing demands of English, implementation of an effective teaching method in class is essential for all English teachers. Thus, how to adopt an effective method to make the grammar teaching more interesting becomes very important. Nowadays, most English teachers share the same idea that language is the most important means of communication. For this reason, ELT should focus on developing the learner's communicative competence.

The aim of CLT is to develop the student's communicative competence. However, it doesn't mean to get rid of grammar teaching. Grammar instruction should be out of question a necessary part in foreign language teaching. Nowadays, the reason of English teachers putting more emphasis on the importance of grammar teaching again is not adopt the traditional teaching method. They try to find how to use CLT to

integrate language forms with language functions and to reach the ultimate goal of English teaching, which is the training of communicative competence.

CLT was introduced to China in the early 1990s. Its adoption reflects the dissatisfaction with the traditional pedagogy. This teaching method advocates how to use language as a means of communication. CLT has influenced Chinese foreign language teaching greatly and has been vigorously promoted by many English teachers. However, CLT is not to abandon the Grammar-Translation Method. The main purpose of CLT is to teach students how to put the knowledge that they have learned in the classroom into practice, which is in accord with the aim of foreign language teaching. As mentioned above, the purpose of foreign language teaching is to develop the learner's communicative competence. In other words, foreign language teachers should focus on how to improve the student's ability to use the language. If the language teaching pays less attention to the development of learners' communicative competence, or only takes the language knowledge instruction as the teaching objective, there would be a lot of "dumb" English learners. Thus, according to the current situation in China, the teaching goal of university English teaching includes two parts. For one thing, Chinese English educators should instruct certain language knowledge, which consists of pronunciation, grammar, words and phrases. For the other thing, they should focus on cultivating students' language ability, which means the ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Being lack of enough language knowledge, it is impossible to develop the applied language ability. Correspondingly, the improvement of applied language ability will help English

learners to deepen and consolidate their language knowledge.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that English teachers should set cultivating learners' communicative competence as the aim of ELT. They should design enough classroom activities simulating the real world and encourage English learners to actively participate in these activities. If English teachers could make the most of CLT, they would make their teaching more efficient.

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