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The Application of Communicative Language Teaching(CLT) in Spoken English Teaching in Middle School

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Abstract

The early 20th century saw the development of the Communicative Language Teaching. It peaked in the middle of the 20th century and was brought into our nation, following decades of research. After that, three curriculum revisions have taken place in our nation, confirming the significance of the communicative approach to teaching English in senior high school. The overall objective, as stated in the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2022), is to develop students' comprehensive language skills, including oral English communication skills. This ideology supports that the communicative approach is the best suitable approach for improving spoken English in senior high school classrooms. By using it, the issue of merely explaining grammar structure and ignoring developing students' capacity to using language practically has been resolved. This thesis methodically presents the theoretical foundations of the communicative approach, demonstrating that, in comparison to conventional teaching method, the communicative approach can increase students' motivation. At the same time, it provides a brief overview of the communicative approach's implementation in high school spoken English instruction, showing the feasibility of applying the this method to design activities in high school.

Keywords

The Communicative Language Teaching; Communicative Competence; Design; communicative classroom activities

1. Introduction

The importance of oral English proficiency has grown with global communication and cultural exchange. The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2022) state that the overall goal of the senior high school English curriculum is to enable students to further develop comprehensive language skills, including oral communication, building on their English learning during compulsory education.

However, Chinese students have historically struggled with speaking, and many are unable to communicate in everyday settings. Therefore, it is necessary and urgent to take effective measures to meet the requirements of the new curriculum standards and cultivate students' communicative competence.

In line with the new curriculum standards, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an effective approach aimed at developing students' communicative competence, emphasizing language use in context rather than grammatical structure. CLT was introduced in China in the late 1970s and has since undergone constant development and improvement, greatly influencing English teaching approaches. Thus, with societal development and current needs, it is critical to examine the role of CLT in oral English instruction and how to apply it to the design of oral English classroom activities.

Generally, the use of CLT in oral English instruction in China over the past few decades has focused primarily on theory and research in higher education. Hence, there have been few in-depth or systematic studies on its application in senior high schools. The primary purpose of this thesis is to investigate the best ways to design communicative classroom activities that help senior high school students develop communicative skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Researches on the Application of CLT in Spoken English

Chomsky (1965) distinguished linguistic competence from language behavior, arguing that sufficient competence enables the production of an unlimited number of sentences. Hymes (1972) expanded this view by introducing communicative competence, emphasizing that language ability depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on appropriateness in use. This shifted the focus from structural mastery to the capacity to use language in social activities. Building on this, linguists such as Candlin (2001), Widdowson (1978), and Halliday (1994) argued that language teaching should aim to develop students' communicative competence—a principle central to the communicative approach.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) define Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as integrating functional and grammatical instruction through collaborative use of language. Howatt (1984) identified two versions: the weak version, summarized as "learn to use", which provides opportunities for communication practice, and the strong version, or "use to learn",which holds that language is acquired through communication itself. Halliday (1994) noted that the weak version views communication as information exchange for practice, while the strong version emphasizes meaningful interaction with language content. Margie (1984) further stated that language is inherently interactive and context-dependent, leading CLT to prioritize helping students understand the communicative function of language in social contexts.

2.2. Domestic Researches on the Application of CLT in Spoken English

Liu (2006) emphasizes that teachers' understanding of CLT and their ability to implement it in classroom activity design are crucial. Liu (2009) further notes that CLT has shifted high school English instruction away from a sole focus on language structure toward language function, with teachers adhering to the principle of "using language to learn language" to ensure authentic and effective communication. Qu (2009) finds that students generally respond positively to CLT in improving oral English. However, Ye (2009) points out a limitation: CLT tends to neglect grammar instruction, leading to frequent grammatical errors in students' spoken language. Wang (2021) identifies additional issues in middle school oral English instruction, such as students' weak oral foundations, unrealistic communication, and a disconnect between oral and writing instruction.

3. The Application of CLT in the Design of Communicative Spoken English Classroom Activities

In a communicative classroom, students must be given opportunity to produce output in more regulated activities as well as exposure to input that they can attend to. One characteristic that all controlled activities have in common is a high level of control over student output and an intentional emphasis on language. For this kind of activity, several labels have been proposed; the most well-known ones are probably: accuracy-based activities and fluency-based activities.

3.1. Accuracy-based Activities

3.1.1. Contextualized activity

The first comes to the contextualized activity, whose goal is to demonstrate the connection between language form and communication function. This involves searching for a circumstance where a structure is frequently employed.

3.1.2. Personalizing practice

The second requirement is to give students the opportunity to express their own ideas, feelings, preferences, and opinions by personalizing the language used in the activity. Since personalized activities let learners discover how they might use language resources in interpersonal contexts and make language more memorable, creating a high motivation for the students to express themselves freely and authentically. This means in such an activity must give students opportunity to say what they what to say.

3.1.3. Building awareness of the social use of language

The third requirement is for improving knowledge of and practice key components of language use in social contexts. The goal of this is to comprehend acceptable

social behavior and the vocabulary that goes along with it.

3.1.4. Building confidence

The fourth need is to help students become more at ease and self-assured so that eventually they can speak and understand English spontaneously. As a class of students practice speaking the language together, controlled activities can be effectively used to foster unity among the pupils. By utilizing cross-class questioning or pair work exercises, the teacher can foster a supportive and relaxed atmosphere for communication in the classroom. This will make fluency work's more challenging and risk-taking interactions easier.

3.2. Fluency-based Activities

3.2.1. Free conversation

Free conversations can offer significant chances to enhance certain aspects of fluency. Ideally, students should be able to debate a wide range of subjects that engage their interests, opinions, backgrounds, and experiences during free discussion activities. By attracting other speakers, free discussion can also motivate students to employ the vocabulary required to maintain a topic for an extended amount of time. What's more, students can use this as an opportunity to practice interpersonal communication skills, such as holding and taking turns, introducing topics, and promoting comments and other contributions.

Nonetheless, because there are obstacles to overcome, teachers frequently worry about less planned fluency activities. For instance, participation in a free discussion is not guaranteed by all participants, especially when it occurs in small groups. These factors make it necessary for discussions to have some form of structure or support.

Firstly, the quantity of information provided by the teacher or the resources is one source of help. Secondly, phasing the activities guided by the teacher carefully is another form of support. For instance, the teacher might introduce a quiet period as an initial step in helping students come up with ideas for a topic. Thirdly, the establishment of discussion goals provides a third form of support. The steps required inspire people to communicate and to utilize communication techniques to try to understand what other people are saying. Teachers may be particularly concerned about setting a cooperative aim as opposed to a competing one when they receive this kind of support.

3.2.2. Role-play

The term "role-play" includes a variety of activities, from straightforward conversations sparked by particular details on role cards to more intricate simulations that go through multiple stages. Thus, the roles are controlled by both the teachers and the materials, but the students get control over the language they

use.

When role-playing is done in groups or couples instead of to one large group performing in front of the class, there are a number of benefits that have been mentioned for this type of fluency activity. Additionally, students will practice language that differs based on the environment, formality of the scenario, and function needed for each role as they assume a number of roles during a program of role-plays.

Nevertheless, overcoming some of role-play's limitations is necessary for it to be successful. One possible limitation could be closely related to assigning roles to students and their capacities for role-playing empathy. It is greatly rely on the motivation and willingness of the students to change personas , so it is definitely a personal matter.

3.2.3. "Gap" activities

This occurs when every student in a pair or group possesses information that the other students do not. Information from the learners must be exchanged in order to finish a task. Hence, students would negotiate meaning more in an activity that requires the exchange of information than in one where it is optional, like in free discussion or an activity involving more participants. Another advantage of this type of activity is that it can create students stronger motivation to bridge the information gap's so as to solve the problems actively. Teachers can create reasoning-gap, information-gap, or opinion-gap activities based on the subject or the resources that are accessible. The size of the group—whether it should be two people working in pairs or three people or more—deserves consideration.

3.3. Range and Balance of Activities

Teachers who are creating communicative classroom activities for spoken English instruction need to take into account multiple factors. The first is the connection between the selected range and the situations in which students must perform. What's more, finding a balance between practice activities that require a monologue and those that involve two or more speakers is another thing to think about. Moreover, designing tasks that are equally focused on accuracy and fluency is another crucial requirement for creating communicative activities in the classroom.

It is worth of mentioning that accuracy and fluency are complementary, not opposite. Thus, teachers should definitely modify their activity design in light of what is significant to them at any given time.

To sum up, when creating communicative classroom activities, teachers should consider the following criteria:

- Participation within the group
- Complexity of interactions
- Opportunities for management of interaction

- Degree of simulation required
- Structure of the activity
- Motivation

3.4. Management of Classroom Activities

Xia (2003) pointed out that the biggest difference between communicative approach and traditional teaching method is that the communicative approach requires the classroom to be student-centered rather than teacher-centered. As a result, the role of teacher has changed dramatically. Teacher need to establish a comforting learning atmosphere where students feel comfortable taking chances and produce language. Because certain communication activities have a complex structure, classroom management is also a critical topic.

Confronted with some complex tasks in the communicative activities, the fundamental idea is to start with easy pair-work activities and work your way up to more challenging activities by introducing more complex tasks gradually. It also entails creating explicit classroom guidelines. Those for working in pairs could include:

- providing a thorough explanation of the requirements, along with a demonstration if necessary.
- asking the class to review; or having two students attempt the task as an example.
- monitoring as soon as the pair work begins to ensure that each pair is following the instructions and is understanding them.

While, some students who come from educational environments where individualistic or competitive goal structures are the norm are not accustomed to working cooperatively in groups. Therefore, the implications are, for patient and gradual instruction as well as for thorough consideration of the practical aspects while making decisions. These could include things like

How to set an appropriate group size for a certain task.

How to choose group members, and whether the teacher should do this in order to create a constructive mix.

How to handle situations where groups complete tasks at various times.

4. Conclusion

The requirements of students' comprehensive language ability cultivation in the new curriculum standards are highly consistent with the communicative teaching method, which places emphasis on students' practical language application ability and emphasizes students' language expression and interaction in real communicative situations. By using a communicative teaching approach, students can develop their language application and communicative skills, as well as their motivation and participation in the learning process.

Teachers, therefore, should first develop a solid understanding of CLT and apply it flexibly. They also need to consider students' interests, abilities, and preferences to meet diverse needs. In designing classroom activities, teachers are encouraged to use contextualized and personalized practice in accuracy-based tasks, and to incorporate free discussion, role play, and gap activities in fluency-based tasks. Equally important are the range and balance of activities, along with effective classroom management. Both teachers and students play crucial roles in fostering communicative competence.

Although this thesis has limitations, it aims to contribute to English teaching reform by addressing the demand for talent capable of using English in real contexts. CLT places higher demands on teachers, who should therefore strengthen their theoretical knowledge and instructional skills. Communicative classroom activities also help develop students' learner autonomy and motivation, an area worth further exploration.

Ultimately, senior high school English teaching should go beyond knowledge transmission to equip students with essential skills for their future. Teachers should act as guides, keeping in mind that learning is ultimately the student's own responsibility—a principle reflected in the teaching philosophy "Less is More."

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