

The Application of Communicative Approach in English Speaking Teaching

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Abstract

Communicative approach is an approach centered on the cultivation of learners' communicative competence. Unlike traditional methods that focus on grammar rules and linguistic structures, this approach stresses the importance of using the language in real-life contexts rather than learning the rules of usage. Its primary goal is to enhance learners' ability to communicate effectively, which involves not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to perform various language functions. In English speaking teaching, it offers numerous advantages. It creates an authentic language environment, enabling students to practice speaking in situations similar to real-life context, thus enhancing their fluency and accuracy. However, current English speaking teaching often overlooks practical communication, relying too much on grammar drills and memorization, resulting in students' inability to apply language flexibly. So this paper aims to explore the effective application of the communicative approach in English speaking teaching. By analyzing its theoretical basis and practical strategies, it seeks to provide insights for teachers to overcome the shortcomings of traditional teaching and improve students' oral English proficiency.

Keywords

Communicative approach; Communicative competence; English speaking teaching

1. Introduction

English speaking teaching plays a vital role in cultivating students' core English literacy and promoting their overall development. As a fundamental skill, speaking proficiency not only enhances students' ability to communicate effectively but also fosters critical thinking, creativity, and cross-cultural understanding (Wang & Zhou, 2004). In an increasingly interconnected world, strong speaking skills empower students to express themselves confidently, collaborate with others, and adapt to diverse environments. Moreover, mastering spoken English lays a solid foundation for future academic and professional success. However, despite its significance, current English speaking teaching in high schools faces several challenges. Traditional teaching often emphasize grammar and vocabulary at the expense of practical

communication, leaving students ill-prepared for real-life interactions. Additionally, limited class time, large class sizes, and a lack of authentic speaking opportunities hinder students' ability to practice and improve. Furthermore, the fear of making mistakes and the pressure to achieve accuracy often discourage students from actively participating in speaking activities. These shortcomings highlight the urgent need for innovative approaches that prioritize meaningful communication and create a supportive environment for students to develop their speaking skills effectively.

The communicative approach, as an important teaching approach, emphasizes cultivating students' communicative competence in various real-life contexts. It is a widely adopted approach in English speaking teaching, emphasizing real-life communication and interaction as the core of language learning. Unlike traditional methods that focus on grammar and accuracy, this approach prioritizes fluency and meaningful exchanges, encouraging students to use English in authentic contexts. Activities such as role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks are commonly used to simulate real-world scenarios, enabling students to practice speaking in a natural and engaging way. The communicative approach is particularly important because it fosters students' confidence and motivation, helping them overcome the fear of making mistakes. By focusing on communication rather than perfection, it creates a supportive environment where students can experiment with language and develop their speaking skills effectively. This method not only enhances students' ability to express themselves but also prepares them for real-life interactions, making it a vital component of modern English speaking teaching.

In English speaking teaching, the communicative approach is essential. Traditional methods often lead to students' mechanical language use. This approach creates authentic communication scenarios, like role-plays and group discussions, enabling students to practice in real-world-like settings. It encourages students to express ideas freely, enhancing fluency and confidence. By interacting with peers, they also improve listening comprehension and learn to adapt language to different situations. Thus, it helps students develop practical oral English skills for real communication.

2. Communicative approach

2.1. Background of communicative approach

Communicative approach originated in Europe in the early 1970s. The increased need for communication between European countries makes people need to be bilingual or even multilingual. This social background has led to the need for changes in language teaching methods. In particular, the establishment of the European Community has promoted economic cooperation and cultural exchanges among European countries, and further emphasized the importance of language communication. In addition, the emergence of communicative approach is closely related to the transformation of linguistic research. From structuralism to functionalism, lin-

guistics began to focus on the use of language rather than the form, and it began to turn from a simple structural analysis to the study of language use. This change prompted the emergence of communicative approach, which made language teaching no longer focus on the structure and form of language, but more on the function and use of language in communication. The linguistic background of communicative approach is also influenced by the linguistic tradition in the UK. The linguistic tradition focuses on practical application of language and communicative competence, which is in line with the core objectives of communicative approach. Under the influence of this linguistic tradition, communicative approach has been further developed. In 1978, John Munby published "Communicative Syllabus Design" and Widdowson published "Teaching Language as Communication", which marked the formal establishment of communicative approach (Cai, 2002).

With the acceleration of globalization and the increase of international communication, people's demand for communicative competence is increasing. Therefore, communicative approach has been widely concerned and applied now.

2.2. Theoretical basis of communicative approach

The meaning of communicative approach is very rich, which involves the design of teaching syllabus, the compilation of teaching materials, the design of specific classroom teaching methods and classroom activities, as well as the corresponding test design and evaluation system. Communicative approach also involves many other disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, psychology and so on. Therefore, the content of communicative approach is quite rich.

The linguistic theory of communicative approach mainly comes from two aspects: one is Hymes' communicative competence theory and the other is Halliday's functional linguistics theory (Shu and Zhuang, 2008).

About the "communicative competence" proposed by Hymes (1972). He coined this term in order to contrast a communicative view of language and Chomsky's theory of competence. Hymes's theory of communicative competence was a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language (Richards & Rodgers, 2000). He criticizes the abstract communicative competence proposed by Chomsky. Hymes held that such a view of linguistic theory was sterile, that linguistics theory needed to be seen as part of a more general theory incorporating communication and culture. He believes that Chomsky's theory ignores the sociocultural characteristics of language and the communicative function of language (Shi & Qi, 2005). In his view, a person who acquires communicative competence requires both knowledge and ability for language use. He believes that communicative competence includes not only the correct grammatical form and the acceptability of language, but also the appropriate-

ness of language. He believes that Chomsky's concept of "language competence" fails to fully reveal human language ability, because human language ability is not only reflected in whether he can speak sentences that conform to grammatical rules, but also whether the sentences he speaks meet the needs of the context at that time, whether he knows when and where to speak and how to say it. So that Hymes put forward four parameters of "communicative competence": possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance. Possibility is similar to Chomsky's concept of language competence; feasibility mainly refers to the use of language must be understandable; appropriateness is often referred to as social pragmatics standardization; performance actually refers to the convention of language use.

Another linguistic basis for communicative approach comes from Halliday's theory of functional linguistics: the main functions of language include the following: instrumental function: acquiring other things with language; regulating function: using language to control the behavior of others; interactive function: use language to communicate with others; interpersonal function: using language to express personal feelings and meaning; heuristic function: language learning and discovery; imagination function: create an imaginary world with language; expressive function: use language to communicate information (Shu & Zhuang, 2008).

In short, the theoretical basis of communicative approach is diversified, which absorbs the theories of communicative competence theory, functionalism, sociolinguistics theory and other disciplines. These theories together constitute the theoretical basis of communicative approach and provide a solid theoretical support for the development and application of communicative approach.

2.3. The characteristics of communicative approach

According to Brown (2021), the definition of communicative language teaching includes four characteristics. (1). Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence. (2). Form is not the primary framework for organizing and sequencing lessons. Function is the framework through which forms are taught. (3). Accuracy is secondary to convey a message. Fluency may take on more importance than accuracy. The ultimate criterion for communicative success is the actual transmission and receiving of intended meaning. (4). In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language productively and respectively in unrehearsed contexts.

According to Wang (2000), there are a number of emphasis that communicative approach makes. Firstly, language function is stressed as much as form. Secondly, appropriate use of the language is a part of communicative competence. The language teaching materials should be as authentic as possible and not present too much artificial grading of language. Thirdly, language fluency is just as important as accuracy, because one of the important teaching goals of communicative language approach is

to attempt to build fluency. However, fluency should never be encouraged at the expense of clear, unambiguous and direct communication. Fourthly, the actual language learning activities themselves are as significant as the language content of those activities. In short, communicative approach is not a fixed teaching mode. It is based on students' needs to use various methods flexibly to improve students' communicative competence (Littlewood, 2000).

The typical characteristics of communicative language teaching in class are: the teaching emphasizes semantic connotation and social function rather than language structure; there are real instructional materials to create real life situations and tasks aimed at solving problems; there are often two or several students in a group discussion, learners can express their opinions, brainstorm and other ways to participate in the teaching to supplement the information gap; teachers will participate or assist students in the discussion to promote communication.

2.4. The principles of communicative approach

Xu Qiang (2000) put forward three principles that communicative teaching method should follow, they are: all activities should focus on communication; try to reproduce the process of communication; and do not always correct mistakes. Among the three principles proposed by Xu, the third one is partially overlaps with the four characteristics proposed by H. D. Brown, that is, the tolerance for mistakes in students' communication. One distinguishing feature of communicative approach from other teaching methods is that communicative approach takes a more tolerant attitude towards students' language mistakes. Because communicative approach emphasizes the meaning of language, students can freely choose the language they want to use, and there is no need to correct every mistake of students.

3. Problems of English speaking teaching

Although certain achievements have been made in high school English speaking teaching at present, there are still numerous issues that urgently need to be addressed. These problems not only restrict the improvement of students' oral proficiency but also impact the cultivation of their comprehensive language application abilities and cross-cultural communication competencies. Consequently, they are not conducive to helping students adapt to the diverse social demands of the future.

3.1. Insufficient creation of authentic contexts

The communicative approach emphasizes the creation of authentic contexts close to real life, enabling students to use the language in practical communication. However, at present, high school English speaking teaching is mostly confined to the classroom. Although teachers design some situational dialogues, they tend to be formalized and lack authenticity and complexity. For example, when simulating a shopping scenario, teachers only have students ask about the prices of simple goods and make

purchases, without involving real and complex situations such as returns, exchanges, or bargaining. As a result, students find it difficult to flexibly apply the oral English knowledge they have learned in real-life situations.

Also, there is a lack of authentic language materials in real class. Real-life language communication is often accompanied by rich body language, facial expressions, and variations in tone. However, in teaching, the oral materials provided by teachers are mostly in the form of written texts, lacking authentic audio and video resources. Students have limited access to the intonation fluctuations, speech speeds, and various non-verbal cues used by native English speakers in actual communication. This makes it difficult for them to accurately understand and use these elements in real communication, thus affecting the effectiveness of their interactions.

3.2. The interaction form is monotonous

The communicative approach advocates for multi-directional interactions between teachers and students as well as among students themselves. However, in actual classrooms, interactions mostly take the form of teachers asking questions and students answering them. Even group discussions often become mere formalities. Some students actively participate in interactions and become the dominant communicators in the classroom, while introverted or less proficient students have lower participation levels and may even become “onlookers”. For instance, during group discussions, some students always remain silent listeners and rarely express their own opinions. Over time, the oral expression abilities of these students do not receive effective training.

Moreover, interaction topics mainly revolve around textbook content, lacking expansiveness and depth. To fulfill teaching tasks, teachers often conduct oral exercises according to the sequence and content set in the textbooks, without guiding students to delve deeper into and expand upon the topics. During communication, students can only engage in simple and superficial dialogues, finding it difficult to have in-depth ideological exchanges and effectively apply language. As a result, they are unable to significantly improve the logicity and richness of their oral expressions. For example, when discussing the topic of environmental protection, students merely stop at simple statements like “We should protect the environment” without further exploring specific protection measures and the challenges faced.

3.3. Neglecting the integration of cultural factors

The communicative approach emphasizes the close connection between language and culture, stating that language communication is also a form of cultural exchange. However, high school English speaking teaching often focuses more on language forms and neglects the imparting of cultural background knowledge. During the teaching process, teachers seldom cover aspects such as the cultural customs, social etiquette, history, and geography of English-speaking countries. When communi-

cating, students frequently encounter situations where they use inappropriate expressions or misunderstand others' intentions due to their lack of understanding of these cultural differences. For example, not knowing about the importance Western culture places on personal privacy, students may ask foreign teachers sensitive questions like age and income during conversations, causing discomfort to the other party.

In addition to imparting cultural knowledge, the communicative approach also places great importance on cultivating students' cross-cultural communication competence, including understanding the ways of thinking and values under different cultural backgrounds. However, in current teaching, there are few training activities specifically aimed at cross-cultural communication competence. When facing communication partners from different cultural backgrounds, students lack the ability to respond flexibly and are unable to adjust their communication styles according to the other party's cultural characteristics, which affects the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication.

3.4. Lack of personalized teaching

Each student has different foundations in oral English, learning styles, and interests. The communicative approach advocates teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. However, high school oral English teaching mostly adopts a unified teaching model and content, following a fixed teaching pace. For students with a strong oral English foundation, the teaching content lacks challenge and fails to stimulate their motivation for further improvement. On the other hand, for students with a weak foundation, the content may be overly difficult, leading to a fear of difficulties and resulting in poor overall teaching effectiveness. For instance, during oral training, all students are required to complete topic expressions of the same difficulty level within the same time frame, without considering the individual differences among students.

Different students are suited to different learning strategies, but teachers often overlook providing guidance on learning strategies in oral English teaching. Students don't know how to choose appropriate learning methods based on their own characteristics, such as how to memorize vocabulary effectively or how to improve oral fluency. This leaves students lacking direction and methods in their oral English learning process, resulting in low learning efficiency and difficulty in achieving ideal progress.

3.5. Imperfect Evaluation Mechanism

The communicative approach calls for a comprehensive and diversified evaluation approach. However, in current high school oral English teaching, evaluations are predominantly conducted by teachers, and the evaluation criteria mainly focus on linguistic forms such as pronunciation, intonation, and grammar, while paying in-

sufficient attention to the fluency of oral expression, the richness of content, and the effectiveness of communication (Zhang, 2018). This one-sided evaluation criterion fails to comprehensively reflect students' oral English proficiency, easily leading students to overly emphasize the correctness of linguistic forms while neglecting the practical communicative function of oral expression.

At present, oral English teaching evaluations are mostly carried out at the end of a class or during exams, lacking formative evaluation. Teachers are unable to promptly understand the problems and progress of students during the oral English learning process, and students cannot adjust their learning strategies in a timely manner based on evaluation feedback. For example, after a period of oral English learning, teachers only provide a final evaluation score without keeping detailed records and conducting in-depth analysis of students' performance during the learning process. As a result, students have no idea which aspects they have improved in and which areas still require further enhancement.

4. Problem Solutions

The communicative approach emphasizes that language is a tool for communication, and teaching should revolve around real-life communicative activities, with a focus on cultivating students' language application abilities and communicative competence. In view of the deficiencies in high school English oral English teaching, this paper also puts forward some suggestions and solutions.

4.1. Create authentic contexts for students

Incorporate English elements into classroom decoration, such as putting up maps of English-speaking countries, famous quotes, and posters of classic movies. This helps create a strong English-learning atmosphere. Teachers should try to use English as much as possible when teaching, gradually increasing the proportion of English usage from simple classroom instructions to complex knowledge explanations. This allows students to immerse themselves in an English language environment and subtly improve their listening and oral expression abilities.

Schools can frequently organize extracurricular English practical activities. For example, they can hold English corner events with different themes, such as cultural exchanges, current affairs hot topics, and hobbies. Students should be encouraged to engage in free communication and discussion in English. Schools can also organize English drama performances, English speech contests, English singing competitions, and other activities to provide students with platforms to showcase their oral English skills. By participating in these activities, students can gain a deeper understanding and application of English while also practicing their performance, thinking, and adaptability skills.

4.2. Design diverse interactive tasks

Teachers can adopt the cooperative learning model in groups and design oral tasks that are both challenging and collaborative (Zhang, 2007). For instance, when conducting topic discussions, divide students into groups. Each group should discuss a specific topic, with group members working together to collect materials, analyze problems, put forward viewpoints, and select a representative to give a summary speech. During the discussion, students need to communicate, listen, and cooperate with each other to complete the task, thereby improving their oral expression abilities and teamwork skills.

The information-gap activities can be used to create information asymmetry among students, motivating them to obtain information and complete tasks through communication. For example, give each student a different picture with some detailed information on it. Students should ask each other in English about the content on the pictures to get complete information and finally complete a whole jigsaw puzzle. Such activities can stimulate students' desire to communicate and enhance the initiative and accuracy of their oral expressions.

Based on the teaching content and students' real-life situations, teachers can design various role-play and simulated scenario activities. For example, simulate scenarios such as airport security checks, hospital visits, and hotel check-ins. Let students play different roles, such as passengers, security personnel, doctors, patients, and hotel staff, and engage in real-life dialogues. During role-play, students can experience the language and behavior patterns of different roles, improving the adaptability and flexibility of their oral expressions.

Teachers should encourage students to design their own roles and scenarios independently, tapping into their creativity and imagination. For example, when learning about environmental protection topics, ask students to design a scenario for an environmental protection awareness campaign by themselves and play roles like environmental protection volunteers and citizens, communicating and promoting environmental protection in English. This can make students more actively participate in oral English learning and enhance their learning interest and enthusiasm.

4.3. Cultivate students' cultural awareness

In oral English teaching, based on the teaching materials, teachers should introduce cultural background knowledge of English-speaking countries, such as history, geography, customs, and social etiquette. For example, when learning about Western festivals, teachers can provide detailed information about the origin, celebration methods, and cultural connotations of the festivals, enabling students to understand the differences between Western and Chinese cultures. Through learning cultural background knowledge, students can better comprehend the cultural meanings behind the English language and avoid misunderstandings and embarrassment in cross-cultural communication.

Teachers can guide students to read literary works, newspapers, and magazines

from English-speaking countries, as well as watch English movies and TV series, allowing them to personally experience the cultural atmosphere and lifestyles of these countries. During the reading and viewing process, teachers can assign some related oral tasks, such as asking students to share their reading feelings or discuss movie plots in English, thereby promoting students' understanding and application of cultural knowledge.

Teachers can also lead students to carry out cultural comparison research projects. Students can choose a topic with significant cultural differences between China and the West, such as food culture, educational concepts, or family values, and conduct in-depth research and comparative analysis. They can collect information through methods like consulting materials, conducting interviews, and distributing questionnaires, and then write research reports in English and present and exchange them. Through cultural comparison research, students can gain a deeper understanding of the differences between different cultures and improve their sensitivity and adaptability in cross-cultural communication.

4.4. Adopt diverse teaching methods

At the beginning of the semester, teachers can conduct a comprehensive assessment of students' oral English proficiency through oral tests, questionnaires, and classroom performance observations. This helps them understand each student's situation in terms of pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary size, grammar application, fluency, and communicative competence. Based on the assessment results, students can be divided into different levels. Teachers can then formulate different teaching objectives and contents for students at each level and design personalized oral learning tasks and activities. For instance, for less-proficient students, the focus should be on strengthening training in pronunciation, intonation, basic vocabulary, and sentence patterns. For high-achieving students, teachers should encourage them to engage in innovative expression and in-depth thinking, and initiate discussions on cross-cultural communication and academic topics.

Teachers can establish oral learning portfolios for each student, documenting their learning process, progress, and existing problems. They should have regular one-on-one conversations with students and, based on the learning portfolios, provide personalized learning guidance and suggestions to help students formulate suitable learning plans and strategies.

During classroom interactions and homework grading, teachers should offer timely and personalized feedback to students. They should fully acknowledge and encourage students' strengths and progress to boost their confidence and motivation. For students' problems and shortcomings, teachers should point them out specifically and provide targeted improvement methods and suggestions. For example, after a student gives an oral speech, the teacher can evaluate the student in detail regarding pronunciation, intonation, content organization, and presentation skills, helping the

student continuously improve their oral English proficiency.

4.5. Establish a diverse evaluation system

Teachers should adopt a combination of formative evaluation and summative evaluation to assess students' oral English proficiency comprehensively and objectively. Formative evaluation focuses on students' performance and progress during the learning process, including classroom participation, performance in group activities, homework completion, and oral test scores. Summative evaluation is mainly conducted at the end of the semester, providing a conclusive assessment of students' learning outcomes through oral exams and other means.

Meanwhile, teachers can also introduce multiple evaluation subjects by combining student self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment. Student self-assessment enables students to reflect on their learning process and performance, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and formulate improvement plans. Peer assessment promotes communication and learning among students, allowing them to receive feedback and suggestions from their peers. Teacher assessment, on the other hand, is authoritative and instructive, providing students with professional evaluation and guidance.

Teachers need to emphasize the feedback and motivational functions of evaluation. They should promptly provide evaluation results to students, enabling them to understand their oral English proficiency and existing problems. The feedback should not only point out students' shortcomings but also offer specific improvement suggestions and methods to help them clarify their efforts. Additionally, teachers should highlight the motivational role of evaluation. They should praise and reward outstanding students to stimulate their learning enthusiasm and competitive spirit. For students who have made significant progress, teachers should also give recognition and encouragement so that they feel their efforts are acknowledged, thereby enhancing their learning confidence and motivation.

5. Conclusion

Language is used for communication, and the communicative approach may well be a superior means to achieve this fundamental purpose. Although it diverges from the traditional teaching method, it does not represent a negation of it. Instead, it brings about a paradigm shift in people's perspectives on foreign language teaching and deepens their understanding of the field.

Nowadays, an increasing number of English teachers have come to recognize the immense importance of the communicative approach in oral English instruction. This method emphasizes real-life communication, enabling students to practice and improve their speaking skills in authentic contexts, which is precisely what oral English teaching aims for.

However, in the practical application of the communicative teaching method, it is

inevitably influenced and constrained by numerous factors. These factors can give rise to a host of problems during the teaching process. Yet, it is precisely through tackling these challenges that the communicative approach can evolve and mature. With the continuous refinement and enhancement of the communicative approach, English teaching has gradually achieved a closer integration of imparting language knowledge and cultivating communicative competence. This integration ensures that language knowledge is not taught in isolation but is applied in meaningful communication situations. As a result, it enables the communicative approach to better serve the cause of foreign language teaching in China, especially in the realm of oral English instruction. By persistently exploring and optimizing the application of the communicative approach, we can look forward to a more effective and dynamic oral English teaching landscape in the future.

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