Influencing Factors of Communicative Language Teaching: A Student Perspective from English Majors

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the Communicative Language Teaching Approach has gained significant popularity in the field of foreign language teaching. However, there appears to be a stagnation in its application effects. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the present state of CLT implementation and identify the factors influencing its execution within English major classrooms at Chinese universities from a student perspective. 30 students responded to the questionnaire and 5 students participated in interviews to provide detailed insights. Through analysis, it was observed that CLT has been widely used in English classes and received positive feedback from students. Factors including the Test-oriented Educational system, teacher factors, student factors, and the Chinese traditional Confucius idea about teaching have an important impact on its implementation. Additionally, this article offers potential recommendations aimed at reconciling the CLT Approach with the Chinese educational context.

1. Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed a whirlwind of transitions in the field of English language teaching (Pica, 2000) [1]. Since the late 1970s, China has gradually adopted the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT). Researchers have studied CLT and how to apply it in China's English language teaching classrooms for decades and various researches proved CLT's advantages and importance. However, despite its widespread adoption in college English teaching, there appears to be a stagnation in its application effects. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to explore the current state of the application of CLT and the factors affecting the implementation of CLT in the classrooms of English major students from a student perspective. The article also provides some potential recommendations aimed at aligning the CLT Approach with the Chinese educational context.

2. Literature Review

CLT is student-centered and is currently one of the most popular methods in the field of second language teaching. Its primary goal is for learners to develop "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1971) [2]. Previous studies showed that various factors may affect the implementation of CLT in China's classrooms.

The first reason might be cultural differences. Many studies and research have shown that CLT is not compatible with traditional Chinese cultures and values. Shi (2006)

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said that some researchers have constructed Chinese learners as being obedient to authority——quiet in class and reluctant to ask questions or express their own opinions publicly, which influenced the application of CLT. The second reason might be teachers' factors [3]. Wen's (2019) article points out that looking back on the process of spreading the CLT method, the obvious resistance is that we did not have the teacher conditions to implement the CLT method [4]. Many English teachers in China did not receive the CLT method training, so it was difficult to become successful users of it. Another important hindrance is the students' factors. Koosha and Yakhabi (2013) reported that EFL learners have a low intrinsic motivation to communicate in a foreign language [5]. What's more, students in China often hold the opinion that CLT does not guarantee them adequate knowledge of grammar, which conflicts with their goal of learning English, that is, to pass all kinds of standardized grammar-based examinations (Li, 1984) [6].

Previous research has indicated that the implementation of CLT is challenging and presents many application issues. Therefore, this article aims to explore the current state of CLT application in English major classrooms and explore the multifaceted factors influencing its effective implementation from a systematic and theoretical perspective. Both positive and negative factors will be discussed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The following research questions motivated this research:

(1). What is the application status of the CLT?

(2). What factors affect the implementation of CLT in English class?

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study are 30 senior students from the Department of English Education, at Capital Normal University (CNU). They fulfilled the following criteria: all the students have taken the class *Methods and Approaches of ESL* and have passed the Test for English Majors Band Four (TEM-4). 5 representative students were chosen for further interview investigation based on their questionnaire results.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The study included quantitative research involving 30 students' questionnaire surveys, and qualitative data obtained from interviews with 5 students. The questionnaire was adapted from Chang & S. Goswami (2011) [7] and Liu's (2015) [8] research and then revised for this study. The questionnaire data were collected and analyzed through Wenjuanxing and the interviews with 5 students were conducted online via Tencent Meeting, recorded, and transcribed into English.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Application Status of CLT in English Majors

According to statistics, right now the CLT method is widely known by students and used frequently by teachers in English classrooms. More than 68.75% of the students chose that they had a basic understanding of CLT and knew that CLT emphasizes the importance of communication. "I learned about CLT in the class Methods and Approaches of ESL. And I got to know it better after my internship in a high school." (Student 2).

Nearly a third of the students (31.25%) agreed that CLT has been used very often in their classroom, and over half of those students (56.25%) indicated that their teachers sometimes used it. The most commonly known CLT classroom activities are group discussions, role-plays, and pair-work activities. "In English class, I always engage in large group and small group discussions to exchange views with others or debate on a topic." (Student 4). Student 3 said "I experienced role-plays a lot. I think it's fun and can help me practice and fully understand the content of the course."

Many students have a positive response to it and consider it a helpful method in language learning. 43.75% of the students think that the application of CLT in learning is very helpful and 56.25% of them think it has some help. The CLT method is preferred by students as 32.5% of the students chose "like it very much" and 37.5% of them responded "like it". One student explained that "I think that opinion sharing through CLT activities gets more introverted students to open up and share their opinions. Besides, I think that CLT provides us with many opportunities to practice." (Student 1). Another classmate mentioned in the interview:" The CLT makes me speak my L2 with much more interest and enthusiasm than the previous conventional methods do. It helps me use the target language more comfortably rather than mechanically memorizing the grammar rules." (Student 5)[5].

4.2 Influencing Factors of CLT for English Majors

According to the data, the most important and influential factors are considered from four categories: factors caused by (1) the educational system, (2) teachers' factors,

(3) students' factors, and (4) the Chinese traditional Confucius idea about teaching.

4.2.1 Test-oriented Educational system

Approximately two-thirds of the surveyors (62.5%) indicated that the lack of requirement for oral English in the examination system is the main factor hindering the application of CLT. More than half of the surveyors agreed that the use of CLT will increase if national policies and examinations require more spoken English[6].

Right now in college, tests like College English Test 4 (CET-4) are the most common tools to assess and judge students' English level. However, most tests evaluate students' linguistic ability through the test of reading and writing, grammar and translation, and the memory of vocabulary. To some extent, the importance of speaking is being ignored. Student 2 reported:" Not just in CET-4, even in professional examinations for English Majors like TEM-4, there is no request for communicative competence." Another student indicated:" Only when I was preparing for the TOFEL test to study abroad do I need to value the importance of Speaking because the points of it are equal to Reading, Writing, and Listening." (Student 1). For many teachers and students, passing the exams is the priority of English learning in class. Thus, the teachers are still using the traditional language teaching methods in the class, paying more attention to grammatical and reading skills rather than communication. As for students, they study for the test as it is required to graduate from college.

4.2.2 Teacher Factors

Teachers' understanding of CLT and ways to apply it as well as teachers' English proficiency and teaching ability are also considered to be important factors affecting the application of CLT. It both can promote the implementation of CLT and also easy to hinder the practice of CLT. Compared with other teaching methods, CLT places greater demands on the teacher (Medgyes, 1986) [9]. Teachers need to continuously learn and update their theoretical knowledge and teaching practice methods of CLT, and design communicative activities that can arouse students' interest.

Student 3 reported that "One of my teachers still uses traditional teaching methods in the classroom and mainly focuses on knowledge points and grammar. The teacher's speech occupies almost all the time in the class." These teachers lack understanding of CLT, and their teaching ideas are conservative, thus reducing the opportunities for students to communicate in oral language. On the contrary, some students indicated that their teachers are willing to change their positions in class. "My teacher's classroom is full of different CLT practicing activities. He let us be the core of the class and supported us as much as he could. The freedom to express my own ideas in class makes me love English class even more." (Student 2). These teachers are willing to leave their comfort zones, learn new knowledge of CLT, and constantly innovate their practice. They position themselves as classroom controllers, evaluators, and organizers.

4.2.3 Student Factors

Besides teachers, students are also considered to be the main factor influencing the implementation of CLT, especially their willingness and motivation to communicate in a foreign language (43.75%) and their English proficiency (31.25%). If students do not have a sense of urgency to use English, they will be less willing to communicate in English, and more inclined to use the convenient and simple native language Chinese. If students are not confident about their English proficiency, they will try to avoid communicating in class, which hinders the application of the CLT in English class to a great extent.

Comparing the feedback from Student 1 who achieved Excellent in TEM-4 and Student 4 who received a pass level. The first student mentioned in the interview:" I have a strong learning purpose as I am preparing to study abroad. Oral speaking means a lot to me and that's why I think CLT is a really good method." For student 4, she also understands the benefits and the reasonableness of CLT, however, to some extent, she lacks the motivation to speak oral English. "Our teacher always let us have discussions and presentations, but many times due to my lack of confidence in my accent and limited English proficiency, I'm not cooperating, thus losing many opportunities to practice English."

4.2.4 Confucian Concept of Teaching

Confucianism is the essence of traditional Chinese culture and Confucius's way of teaching and education has a great influence on Chinese people's way of thinking and learning, which may affect the application of CLT to some extent.

While learning and teaching, Confucius highlights the importance of enlightenment and reflection. He suggests that the student should not be inspired when he does not think deeply or struggling with the truth. As a result, sometimes students prefer to remain silent and solve problems through independent thinking, but not actively ask or discuss questions with teachers or classmates.

Moreover, teaching has been viewed in China as a sa-

cred occupation, and teachers are respected and regarded as authorities in the classroom (Rao, 1996) [10]. Classroom engagement is a kind of interaction highly controlled by the teacher. Listening to the teacher in class is always considered to be the best way to learn. "Teachers are imparting knowledge most of the time in class. The interruptions and discussions are sometimes considered to affect the order and progress of the class and are disrespectful to the teacher." (Student 2).

5. Conclusion

The present study has conducted a comprehensive investigation into the current state of CLT application and the factors influencing its implementation in English Majors' classrooms. The findings indicate that CLT is extensively employed in English classes, and garnering positive feedback from students as an effective pedagogical method. Besides, several factors hinder or help improve the adoption of CLT, including the Test-oriented Educational system, teachers' understanding of CLT as well as their professional competence, students' English level and their motivation to use English, and the influence of the Chinese traditional Confucius idea about teaching.

To further enhance the implementation of student-centered communicative language teaching methods at universities, collaborative efforts are required from educational authorities, teachers, and students. Consequently, several recommendations are proposed to reconcile the CLT approach with Chinese classroom settings:

1) Adaptation of CLT methodologies to suit local EFL contexts;

2) Augmentation of oral English assessment weighting in examinations;

3) Provision of additional training opportunities for educators;

4) Cultivation of practical needs among students for learning English.

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