

An Investigation Into Implementation Of Communicative Language Teaching In College English Teaching For Non-English Majors

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Keywords: Communicative Competence; Communicative Language Teaching; Chinese College English Teaching; English Teachers; English Students

Abstract: This study investigates teachers' and students' perceptions of communicative language teaching (CLT) in college English teaching for non-English majors. Fifteen English teachers and 189 students from East China Jiaotong University were selected for this survey. They were asked to finish a questionnaire and take part in a semi-structured interview. After the data were collected and analyzed, this survey revealed the obstacles and difficulties teachers and students met in the implementation of CLT in English classroom. After that, this study indicated some similarities and differences between teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions of CLT on some items in the questionnaires. At the same time, this study tries to figure out how to apply CLT efficiently to improve students' communicative competence in China. The findings of this study show that: (1) the teachers have affirmative attitudes towards CLT and approve of communicative principles in theory; (2) the students have favorable attitudes towards CLT, but they are more accustomed to integration of communicative and non-communicative activities; (3) there are similarities and differences between teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions. They have achieved great consensus on some items, but they also have some big differences; (4) although teachers and students hold positive attitudes towards CLT, they also meet many constraints that hinder the successful implementation of CLT. Based on the findings of this study, the study has offered the following suggestions for English teaching and learning in Chinese colleges. It is suggested that: (1) current examination system should be modified; (2) any authentic materials available should be made available for English teachers and students; (3) teachers should be provided with more practical and effective in-service trainings on how to apply CLT in English classes; (4) class size should be reduced and more opportunities for real English practice should be created.

1. Introduction

There are various English language teaching approaches and methods. Among them, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been accepted as the most effective approach for obtaining communicative competence [1]. CLT has become the driving force that makes the planning, implementation, and evaluation of English language teaching. Among the heated debates on CLT, Chinese teachers' and students' perceptions of CLT and the implementation of CLT in Chinese English language teaching deserve particular attention [2]. Do the students really enjoy communicative activities and real use of language? Do they deem that communicative activities are more effective than non-communicative activities? Can they adapt to this new teaching approach? Do they think that such activities are helpful to them as English learners? Do the teachers really understand CLT and do they favor teaching principles of CLT? Are the teachers really committed to CLT?

Concerning the above questions, many researchers and English teachers have extensively conducted studies on Chinese teachers' and students' perceptions of CLT and ways to promote CLT in China [3]. Most of the studies have revealed that CLT will bring a positive effect on English teaching and learning, but teachers still face difficulties in promoting CLT in China [4-6]. Though there are plenty of researches in this area, only a few studies have been conducted on investigating teachers' and students' perceptions of CLT in Chinese universities [7-9]. And with the development

of CLT, it is essential to explore the constraints that prevent the successful application of CLT in China.

The main purpose of the current study aims to investigate the teachers' and students' perceptions of CLT for non-English majors in East China Jiaotong University (ECJTU), explore the difficulties that hinder the successful implementation of CLT in China and provide some suggestions for future teaching and learning.

2. Data collection and analysis

The students' questionnaire was distributed to them during class time with the help of their English teachers. Before these questionnaires being administered, each teacher was given guidelines and instructions to administer the questionnaire. All the subjects received uniform instructions as to how to fill out the questionnaires. The students were advised that responses would not affect course grades and were urged to answer forthrightly. The subjects were given about 30 minutes to complete the question items, and then the questionnaires were collected within the given time. As to the teachers, they were allowed to take the questionnaire home and finish it in one or two days.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 17.0) was used for the statistical analysis of the data. Firstly, after all questionnaires were collected, the questionnaire data were inputted into the computer and analyzed by SPSS 17.0 so as to obtain descriptive statistics, such as teachers' options of CLT, students' favorite ways of learning English, problems in implementing CLT, problems in developing communicative competence and so on, in order to identify the teachers' and students' general perceptions of CLT.

After that, the researcher made a comprehensive description of the implementation of CLT in college English teaching for non-English majors according to the results of the questionnaires analysis and comments from the semi-conducted interviews. After giving a detailed description of the general implementation of CLT, the researcher revealed the obstacles and difficulties the students and teachers experienced in their English classes.

3. Results and Discussion

After detailed analysis to the questionnaires, there are similarities and differences between teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions on CLT, such as grammar accuracy or fluency, role of group work, roles of teachers and students, role of grammar explanation and error correction in CLT classroom.

3.1. Grammar accuracy or fluency

Item 1 in students' questionnaires and Item 1 in teachers' questionnaires are about accuracy or fluency in English learning and teaching. 88.89% students and 60% teachers showed positive attitude towards fluency and 13.33% teachers didn't show their opinions. Some teachers thought that CLT can make students speak English fluently, but can't take account of grammar accuracy (Item 7 in teachers' questionnaire). Here are some comments from the students and teachers.

"For college English, in my opinion, speaking ability is the most important in English learning. One of the most important aims is to make the students able to communicate with others in daily life and work. So English teaching should put more emphasis on cultivation of oral English skill. You know, pursuit of accuracy doesn't mean fluency in oral English. Some mistakes and slips of tongue in daily communication are allowed." (Teacher 1, 11 September 2010)

"We are college students, not English majors, so I don't think grammar accuracy is the most important. I just want to express myself and can make my communicators understand. That's OK! If I can speak fluent English, that is enough and my classmates will admire me." (Student 11, 12 September 2010)

"Fluent English is important, but in my opinion, English teaching still should place importance on grammar accuracy which is the most basic skills in English learning. CLT is good for communication, but grammar accuracy should not be ignored. I still prefer accuracy to fluency."

(Teacher 3, 11 September 2010)

As for grammar accuracy or fluency, though there are different voices, most students and teachers achieved consensus on fluency.

3.2. Role of group work

As far as group work is concerned, the data showed very big consistency to a large extent. As for teachers, 73.33% of them thought teachers should conduct much group work (Item 8). It is an effective classroom activity in that the students would make initiative exploration and monitor their own learning in group work (Item 9). But there were some different voices. Only 20% teachers expressed their disagreement with group work and they had put forward some difficulties and problems when organizing group activities (Item 10 & Item 11). As for students, most of them (77.25%) liked group work and role play and more than half of them (57.67%) showed they would participate in the group discussion (Item 13 & Item 14). But nearly all the students (90.48%) hoped the teacher would guide them during the group discussions (Item 15). Though in favor of such activities, they still expressed some negative aspects.

“I know the important functions of group work and have conducted them often in my classes. But it is difficult to implement such activities and the results are not so good as expected. The class is too big. Not every student will join in it and speak in English. Some students begin to speak Chinese when they can’t express themselves. I can’t monitor everyone. Too many students! And the classroom is always in chaos. Sometimes, I think it is waste of time to conduct such activities as the results are beyond my satisfaction.” (Teacher 2, 11 September 2010)

“I like group work. It is a good way to force me to speak in English and improve my oral English. During the discussion, we share ideas, and then string them together; finally we present our ideas one by one on the teacher’s desk. Everyone has their own thing to do. To some degree, it develops our team spirit.” (Student 4, 12 September 2010)

“Group work is good for oral English, but there are some drawbacks. For every group work, the teacher will give every group a proper mark according to the performance. So in a group, the good students must help the poor students to write some sentences in order to make the work go on and get good results. So for me, I make almost no progress in this kind of activity.” (Student 6, 12 September 2010)

Group work is indeed a good way to improve spoken English. And most teachers and students are fond of such activities, but some problems arise. So some improvements are required on group work in future teaching to make it a really effective communicative activity.

3.3. Roles of teachers and students

According to the study, both teachers’ roles and students’ roles in CLT classroom have changed greatly. In this study, all the teachers thought that teacher is the facilitator and students are not the passive recipient of knowledge but the transmitter (Item 2). And all of them agreed student-centered teaching method can develop students’ sense of responsibility and self-discipline and also activate their potential (Item 3). Most of the students approved that teachers should play the role as an organizer (Item 20), a counselor, a guider and a facilitator as well as a monitor (Item 21).

“CLT stresses more on students’ self- development. This student-centered method gives students more space to arouse their interest and potentials. Teachers must transform from the traditional method. Teachers are not the leader and don’t control the whole class all the time. What I can do in this situation is listen more and have the students play active roles in communicative activities designed according to their interest. I have more communication than before.” (Teacher 4, 11 September 2010)

“My teacher changed a lot. He doesn’t impose so much on us. And when he is going to conduct some activities, he will listen to our suggestions. That is impossible in middle school. I become much interested in English and make a little improvement in English. I hope this situation will last somehow.” (Student 12, 12 September 2010)

But situation doesn’t develop as well as we expected. There exists gap between the ideal and reality. Both teachers and students express their difficulties. To be exact, they are in a dilemma. The

following statements can give us details.

“I haven’t got any teaching training for CLT before service, I just know a little about CLT. I want to make changes on how to give a lesson. But it is difficult. I am always influenced by my teachers who used the traditional teaching method. So this spoon-fed teaching method really has affected me a lot and it takes a long time to completely adjust to CLT. I think there is a long way to go.”(Teacher 3, 11 September 2010)

“Compared with traditional teaching method, I like CLT more. But it is difficult for me to transform from tradition to CLT totally. I was taught by traditional method for so many years so when I entered university I was completely confused about the communicative activities, for me they all new. But I indeed like them later. But problems still exist. Teachers give me a very big space for self-development. Learn to be responsible for us is difficult. The traditional learning styles are rooted deeply in our mind, so I still depend on teachers’ instruction as in high school do.” (Student 1, 12 September 2010)

Though teachers’ role in language teaching and students’ role in language learning have changed much, there are some difficulties in reality. Indeed, it has a long way to go for transformation of teachers’ role and students’ roles in Chinese English classrooms. If this had achieved good results, then CLT would really benefit all teachers and students.

3.4. Role of grammar explanation

Most teachers and students expressed their approval of communicative activities. However, in the study 46.67% teachers agreed that students would conduct effective communicative activities only when they had mastered the grammar rules (Item 14). And the most important is that 91.01% students liked grammar explanation by examples (Item 5). Also almost half of the students (49.21%) hoped that teachers would explain the grammar rules and give lessons in English.

“I know speaking and listening are very important, but grammar is the basic. I hope the student first master the grammar rules and then make improvement in speaking and listening gradually. The students can’t achieve this aim at one go. So I think grammar first and then others.” (Teacher 3, 11 September 2010)

“I like grammar very much. I’d like the teacher to explain grammar rules by examples in English, so I can remember them easily. Moreover, I hope the teacher speak in English as much as possible when he or she is giving lessons. I think I can improve listening ability in the long run in this way.” (Student 14, 12 September 2010)

Though grammar is the focus of CLT, it has been attached great importance to by most teachers and students. In fact, grammar is the basic for English learners, so it is taken for granted that grammar will have effect on the implementation of CLT.

3.5. Error correction

As far as error correction is concerned, there exists a big difference between students’ perceptions and teachers’ perceptions. According to the results of the questionnaires, 79.89% students liked the teachers to correct their mistakes in the exercises and in oral practice (Item 7). Whereas only 20% teachers liked to correct all mistakes students made, or they would influence students in future study (Item 16). 60% teachers regarded it was necessary to correct some grammar mistakes when these mistakes would impede the successful communication. There are some particular statements.

“As for error correction, I hope teachers will correct or at least point out my mistakes in written exercises and oral practice. If teachers don’t point out or correct them and I don’t realize them, I will make the same mistakes in future study. In the long run, it will be a vicious cycle, which will hinder the successful communication in English. But it is better to correct them after I have finished a sentence, I don’t like being bothered when speaking. ” (Student 3, 12 September 2010)

“In my opinion, I will not correct all the mistakes students have made. I will point out or correct them only when these mistakes influence the understanding or make the conversation very difficult to go on. That students can make daily communication going is OK. Some grammar mistakes can be ignored. Sometimes, it is not always good to strictly adhere to grammar mistakes. Or it will make

the whole communication uncomfortable.” (Teacher 2, 11 September 2010)

As for this point, there are some differences of opinion. To some degree, it showed students' adherence to traditional learning styles and most teachers gave more concern on development of CLT.

4. Conclusion

This study has investigated the implementation of CLT in college English teaching for non-English majors through quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings can be summarized as follows:

First, the responses of the teachers generally show that they have affirmative attitudes towards CLT and approve of communicative principles in theory, but they have faced a range of problems in the actual classrooms. The interview results highlight that some teachers still stick to traditional teaching style.

Secondly, the majority of the student respondents have favorable attitudes towards CLT, but they have also realized that only one method is not enough to cover all the content of language. The students are more accustomed to combination of many approaches, so the best way is to integrate communicative activities with non-communicative activities.

Thirdly, there are similarities and differences between teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions, such as grammar accuracy or fluency, role of group work, roles of teachers and students, role of grammar explanation and error correction in CLT classroom. They have achieved great consensus on fluency, group work, roles of teachers and students, and grammar explanation, some improvements and difficulties are required and overcome to achieve total agreement. As for error correction, there are some differences of opinion. Though it shows students' adherence to traditional learning styles, most teachers have given more concern on development of CLT.

Fourthly, the data obtained from the questionnaires and interview reveal a range of constraints that hinder the successful implementation of CLT, such as grammar-vocabulary-based examination-oriented education system, low level of students' English proficiency and communicative competence, teacher training, introverted and passive characters of Chinese students, lack of opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom (EFL context), traditional teaching and learning style, limited class time and big class size. It seems obvious that only these problems are overcome CLT can we effectively implement actual English teaching and learning.

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