Scientific Research

Text-Books Design and Classroom Presenting

Hui Wang[1], Yanmei Zhen[2]

[1]Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China
[2]Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
Email: wangh@mail.sysu.edu.cn

Abstract

This paper, based on field observations, briefly unveils the problems in communicative language teaching classes. It has been observed that many of the classroom presentations are not in accord with the principles stated in the communicative language teaching approach (CLT). It boils down to two reasons: misconcepts of language teaching; misunderstanding of CLT principles. And possible solutions are presented in this paper, hoping that it will be more practical and beneficial for foreign language teaching in the Chinese context.

Keywords

Communicative; Interaction; Learner-Centeredness; Context; Culture

1. Introduction

The changing global economy has urged foreign language communication to mount to a more essential position; hence the teaching and learning of foreign languages has become a problem at issue. And in the recent decades, language teaching has witnessed their twists and turns. During these years, foreign language teaching has developed from the period of classical language teaching to the period of the intensification of modern language. There are quite a few books compiled, based on the particular method and principles of each period. In this paper, the discussion will be mainly restricted to communicative language teaching in English.

2. Description of Existing Problems

So far, we may declare that the English teaching career has made a big stride forward. But the long-standing problem is that many teachers' classroom presentations do not accord with the principles set in the book designing. As has been observed in classrooms, quite a number of teachers just take their own ways which have long

been considered to be stifling. The underlying reasons for this, as far as I am concerned, can boil down to two points: (1) teachers get stuck in the traditional teaching stereotype that foreign language teaching is to spoon-feed students with grammatical knowledge; (2) teachers may not have a deep understanding of the approach and the principles on which the text-book designing are based. Consequently, a great number of students suffer when thrown into authentic situations, namely, communicating with native speakers from English-speaking countries. This at least indicates that our teachers and students have not paid due attention to the aspects of listening and, especially, speaking in an appropriate way. Let's take *CECL* (*Communicative English for Chinese Learners*) as an example. *CECL* is a set of textbooks compiled on the basis of communicative approach. It is an attempt to apply the communicative approach in EFL in the Chinese context. But how to present your teaching in a communicative way is the biggest problem that a CECL teacher is confronted. And different teachers have different criteria for judging how much communicative is really communicative. On the other hand, teachers find it thorny to demarcate the roles of themselves and students in the actual manipulation.

3. Analysis of the Problems

3.1. Underlying Assumption

Underlying every language course there is a guiding theoretical assumption as to what language and language learning are. Language courses that teach only phonology, grammar and vocabulary assume that a language is no more than a formal system, thus language teaching and learning are equal to the acquisition of various forms of the language. This has been proved to be inadequate in language learning. CECL, based on the approach of communicative language teaching, takes that language is communication, and learning a language means learning to communicate. Furthermore, we learn to communicate through communicating.

3.2. Principles of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching)

The approach of Communicative Language Teaching attaches great importance to meaning in interaction, with contextualization as the basic premise. Under the guiding principle, effective communication is amply sought through communicating. Therefore attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning. On the other hand, any devices which help the learners are acceptable. They may vary in line with the age, interest, aptitude and motivation of students. Dialogs may be employed, but centering around communicative functions rather than rote memorization; pattern drilling may occur, but peripherally conducted; phonological problems may still be addressed, but linked with functions and meanings; judicious use of native language is accepted if necessary and facilitating; translation may be used if students benefit from it. Within the framework of CLT, communicative competence is the desired goal, namely, the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately. Consequently, linguistic variation is the central concept in materials and methodology, and the sequencing of materials is accordingly determined by any consideration of content, function, or meaning which maintains interest. In communicative language teaching, the roles of teachers and students are clearly defined to a certain extent. The whole teaching and learning process is student-centered. Teachers are no longer mere lecturers nor observers, but facilitators. And students should be dominating the learning activities in class. As a result, teachers' role is to help students in any way that motivate them to work with the language. Since language is created by the individual often through trials and errors, and the attempt to communicate is encouraged in the very early beginning, we teachers cannot judge accuracy in the abstract form but in contexts. Moreover, in communication we tend to stress fluency and appropriateness, for communication involves aspects more important than forms, namely, cultural elements, which will be specified in the later section. In order to motivate and encourage students, as earlier stated, teachers should tolerate the errors that students made. By "tolerate", we mean not to interrupt or interfere by any means during the communication or virtual communication, or to point out the errors bluntly and immediately. What we can do is to provide a better alternative afterwards, deliberately contrasting the essential difference to enhance pragmatic awareness.

3.3. The Aims of the Course (CECL)

CLT is intended to equip students with communicative competence. As a language course, based on CLT, it aims to fulfill this task with a full awareness of the complexity of such an objective. Communicative competence, as can be derived from Dell Hymes (1964), consists of linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, and

cognitive and affective capacity. The three components of communicative competence, which have to be realized respectively with the form, the use and the content of a language, are not three isolated entities but three dimensions of one unity. Since CECL is a course for Chinese learners whose future job is to bridge the English-speaking and the Chinese culture, it is part of the specific responsibility of CECL to help to extend learners' knowledge of the language and its culture, to develop their interest in the English-speaking culture, particularly in relation to the Chinese culture. To achieve the desired effects, CECL lays great demands on the teachers who are using the course books. To be exact, it poses a difficult problem for the teachers how to present the texts in a communicative way as specified in the approach of CLT.

3.4. An Analysis of Field Observation

To have an understanding of how CLT is presented in class, I attended quite a few classes taught by different teachers. Each class has 30 students (sophomores) who have similar English learning background. And they had pretests before being grouped into different classes. In a sense, they are parallel. The unit I attended is *Foods and Drink* in CECL Book II. Here in the paper I will choose two representatives as a pair of contrast to investigate the problems, detailed data of observation will be presented in appendices (see **Tables 1** and **2**).

Admittedly, the performance of teacher A can be said to be much more communicative than that of teacher B. At the beginning of the class, teacher A gave the students 10 minutes, as a prelude, for interaction in pairs, meanwhile, she approached each pair listening to them, and facilitated them if necessary. Then she asked some representatives to present their discussions, and encourage opinions and comments from others. When she saw it necessary, she would raise questions which imply the main point of the topic being discussed. When starting the new unit, she, first of all, asked a question "what will you include if you are going to write a recipe?" to initiate the students' activities. In most cases, she used incomplete questions or connectives as markers to elicit responses from students. After dictation, teacher A asked the students to check the answers by using tape script, then she wrote down some words and expressions on the board to see if the students had acquired them or had paid due attention to them. This practice indicated that linguistic forms were not totally neglected, furthermore, they were dealt with adequacy. In the whole process, oral activities and the less interesting exercises were in-

Table 1. The performance of teacher A.

Actions	Principles		
	Learner-centered	Communicative	Content-based
Begins the lesson with warming-up activities.	1	1	1
Facilitates the activities.	1	1	1
Encourages students' spontaneous questions	1	1	2
Uses incomplete questions to elicit responses.	1	1	2
Gives attention to language forms	2	3	1

Note: 1 indicates a strong relationship, 2 weak relationship, 3 no relationship between actions and principles.

Table 2. The performance of teacher B.

Actions	Principles		
	Learner-centered	Communicative	Content-based
Writes down the answers of the assignments.	3	3	2
Asks students compare the answers.	2	3	2
Simply plays the recorder for listening	3	3	2
Reads out the answers.	3	3	2
Gives much attention to language forms	3	3	1

Note: 1 indicates a strong relationship, 2 weak relationship, 3 no relationship between actions and principles.

terwovenly proceeded. As I have observed, what impressed me most is that the teaching and learning process is learner-centeredness, which is the soul of CLT. And the teacher functioned as a participant or a facilitator instead of an observer in class.

Although CLT has its own principles, as stated in the previous section, different teachers may have different criteria for how much communicative is really communicative. Accordingly, they may have varied ways to manifest communicative language teaching as they understand.

Teacher B, at the beginning of a class presentation, she simply wrote down the answers of the last assignment without students' participation. In listening activities, she just played the recorder, and then students were asked to compare their answers with their partners. In terms of written exercises, students were given a period of time to fill in the missing parts, after which she herself read out the answers without students' interaction. I found that comparing answers was the repeated method used after each item, which is practiced without teacher's introduction of necessary background information. The teacher was merely an observer in class. It seemed to me that there was no information exchanged and interaction between the teacher and the learners. When the students were busy, the teacher was observing; likewise, when the teacher was reading out the answers, the students just kept listening. Another feature of teacher B' performance was that she went beyond the boundary of a teacher's responsibility set in the principles of CLT. That is to say she does much work which should be dealt with by students themselves. On the other hand, too much effort was given to new words by the teacher.

Drawing from the above, we find that the whole classroom presentation was dominated by the teacher other than learners-centered. The atmosphere in this class, compared with the one mentioned earlier, appeared very boring. And the students looked rather inert. The problem lies in how to activate learners' motivation or passion. If learners are given too little freedom to conduct their classroom activities, they will feel dull for waiting to be fed.

According to the communicative approach, the following fundamental principles should be taken into consideration:

(a) Language learning is learning to communicate;

(b) Teachers help learners in any way that motivate them to work with the language;

(c) Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pairs and group work, or in their reading and writing.

Since learning a language is to communicate, factors closely related to communication should be highly emphasized. And it is particularly the case in cross-cultural communication which is the ultimate goal in foreign language learning. Unfortunately, these principles have not well been reflected in class presentation. Thus, to fully present the CLT, both teachers and learners need to enhance their pragmatic and cultural awareness. Therefore, it is noteworthy here to elucidate and exemplify the pragmatic factors and culture-loaded phenomena contributing to actual communication. According to Wierzbicka (1985), different languages embody different cultures, and different cultures mean different speech acts. Linguistic differences are assumed to be associated with cultural differences such as spontaneity, directness, intimacy and affection vs. indirectness, distance, tolerance and anti-dogmatism. Features of English which have been claimed to be due to universal principles of politeness are considered to be language-specific and culture-specific. In this sense, speech acts are culture-loaded. And the choices of linguistic forms which realize certain social functions are subject to cultural constraints.

In the following I will elaborate on the pragmatic factors involved when discussing the speech acts of invitation and apology. In the CECL textbook, one of the tasks for the learners is to mark the degree of formality of conversations along a continuum. A teacher's role in this task does not only check the answers. He or she is supposed to explore the pragmatic factors associated with the degree of formality. The teacher should tell the students which sentences signal the degree of formality. And the contextual factors related to conversations should be specified. In other words, the teacher should point out when and where and between whom a conversation is proceeded. For instance, the expression "How about coming to my son's birthday party" is one of the very casual patterns used between close friends; the expression "so-and-so requests the pleasure of your company at…" indicates the rigid relationship between interlocutors. And this expression is usually used on behalf of organizations between clients. When an expression is mismatched with its contexts, communication will be hampered or even break down, for the inappropriate expressions may undermine others' psychological space, their autonomy, their own peculiarities and eccentricities. From the above, we can see that any speech acts carry important social and cultural values. Making an apology is commonplace and very necessary in maintaining social functions. But how to appropriately express one's attitude is rather demanding. Sentences like "I am sorry."

Or "I am terribly sorry" and the like will not always satisfy the one who is offended. The appropriateness of apology depends on the degree of severity of your offences. If you only want to ask for repetition of what one just said, simply say "Pardon me." if you want to apologize when you are to interrupt or correct someone, "Excuse me" will exactly serve your purpose. It will turn complicated if your misdeeds result in losses or irreparable damage to the other party, you must offer compensation, otherwise, the apology of mere regret will not comfort the victim. To sum up, whether a speech act is acceptable is tested in its contexts which include linguistic contexts and social contexts. Therefore, when dealing with communicative competence, the real responsibility of classroom teacher is not to instruct, to spoon-feed students specifically in the intricacies of complimenting, inviting, apologizing, or closing a conversation; rather it is to make students more aware that pragmatic functions exist in language, specifically in discourse, in order that they may be more aware of these functions as learners. As teachers, we must know about these speech acts and their components to determine what is naturalistic input for our students, even though it would be impossible to impart explicitly this knowledge concerning every speech act. We believe that if students are encouraged to think by themselves about culturally appropriate ways to compliment a friend or say goodbye to a teacher, then they may awaken their own abilities for pragmatic analysis.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary

There remain three major problems in foreign language teaching in the Chinese context, one being the false concept about foreign language teaching; others being the traditional teaching materials and improper classroom presentation. The concept dominating foreign teaching circle has been that foreign language teaching is to teach the linguistic structures, grammatical rules. As far as input is concerned, the main weakness of traditional grammar materials is the lack of contexts. One of the problems that often puzzle our teachers is why students do not give the output as intended by the input. One of the reasons is that teachers, as a bridge between teaching materials and learners, do not function properly. Endeavors are still needed to better our teaching approach. As far as I know, it is impossible to completely upset the traditional ways and thoroughly replace them with a newly invented approach, even if we have systematic and scientific ones, because any change will take time before it is finalized.

4.2. Possible Solutions

When we advocate CLT, we do not mean to totally ignore the aspect of grammars. What we take into consideration is how to integrate grammar instruction into communicative language use and how to present grammar with contexts. It is worthwhile for teachers and learners to bear in mind that the theoretical assumptions that communicative interaction is fundamental to language acquisition, and that both learner comprehension and production are necessary to facilitate acquisition. A number of recent studies (Pica, 1987; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Pica et al., 1991) have been evidenced to support the need for learners to be exposed to meaning-based use of the target language, as opposed to teacher-fronted explanations of language features (Fotos, 1992). When learners use the language to communicate with native speakers or each other, they often must ask and answer questions when certain items of discourse are not properly understood, and then they will negotiate interactively and make their final choice of linguistic forms. Based on these generalizations, we need, first of all, to enhance our teachers' awareness of new notion of language teaching, principles of new approach, and arm the students with the pragmatic awareness through communication consciousness-raising performance as well as contextualized grammar consciousness-raising tasks. Secondly, the advents of more communication-oriented textbooks are expected. Without communicative materials, CLT will not easily step into the right track. Furthermore, in the classroom presentation, teachers should make a mental note that they are the facilitators instead of lecturers or observers. And the classroom activities should prepare students for real communications. Teachers should instill the idea into students that we learn to communicate through communicating. This means communication is the ultimate purpose as well as the means.

References

Fotos, S. (1992). Integrating Grammar Instruction and Communicative Language Use through Grammar Consciousness-

Raising Tasks. *TESOL Quarterly, 28,* 323-351. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3587436

Hymes, D. (1964). *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. New York: Harper & Row.

Pica, T. (1987). Interlanguage Adjustments as an Outcome of NS-NNS Negotiated Interaction. *Language Learning, 38,* 45-73. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1988.tb00401.x

Pica, T., & Doughty, C. (1985). Input and Interaction in the Communicative Language Classroom: A Comparison of Teacher-Fronted and Group Activities. In. S. Gass, & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input and Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 115-132). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Pica, T. et al. (1991). Language Learning through Interaction: What Role Does Gender Play? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 13,* 343-376. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100010020

Wierzbicka, A. (1985). Different Cultures, Different Languages, Different Speech Acts. *Journal of Pragmatics, 9,* 145-178. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(85)90023-2