

How Communicative Language Teaching Became Acceptable in Secondary Schools in China

Xiao Qing Liao
[xqliao \[at\] excite.com](mailto:xqliao[at]excite.com)

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an innovation in English language teaching (ELT). CLT emerged as a new teaching approach in Britain in the 1970s. When it was introduced into China in the 1990s, it met with considerable resistance. After the efforts of the educational authorities, it was accepted by many teachers. This essay will briefly describe the measures taken to overcome the resistance and to ensure CLT was used effectively.

The Introduction of CLT in China

In the history of ELT, China saw its first movement towards CLT in the early 1990s. In 1992 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) introduced a functional syllabus, in which the communicative teaching aim was set and the communicative functions to be taught were listed. In the same year, in cooperation with the British Longman, the SEDC published a new textbook series. The syllabus and the textbooks required teachers to teach communicatively in classrooms.

The call for adoption of CLT was not accidental. It came from the educational problem that needed to be solved. This problem was the existing unsatisfactory teaching results of the traditional grammar-oriented method. As Johnson and Morrow (1981, p. 1) state, "new movements often begin as reactions to old ones. Their origins lie in a discontent with an existing state of affairs". Earlier, in 1981, the SEDC issued the national unified syllabus which was structure-based and set "language knowledge" as the main teaching goal in order for students to "lay a solid foundation for further studies". Under this guideline, "87% of teachers in China's middle schools used the traditional method in the late 1980s" (Zuo, 1990, p. 40). The teachers focused on grammar and structure. As a result, the traditional method produced unsatisfactory teaching results. Students became almost "deaf and dumb" and had little ability to speak and understand English (Ng & Tang, 1997).

The SEDC is the official authority that can make educational policy. It is the representative of the central government and can determine the goal, curriculum, course books, and even teaching methods throughout the country. "The highly centralized Chinese system of education subverts the development of more effective methods of teaching English in a number of ways, particularly in the ways foreign language teachers are selected and trained, materials and methods chosen, and programs and teachers are evaluated" (Campbell & Zhao, 1993). Individual teachers were not expected to make any changes. The new teachers must take the designated textbooks and follow the methods required by the syllabus. If not, they would not be regarded by their administrators "as competent and committed teachers" (ibid.).

Because the SEDC had so much power it seemed that every teacher must use CLT. However, because the method was new in every way, it met with considerable resistance from the start. "Many teachers have tried to change the dominant teaching procedures but quickly get frustrated, lose their initial enthusiasm, and acquiesce to tradition" (Campbell & Zhao, 1993). Thus the teachers believed that it was not feasible to adopt CLT because China had its special characteristics. These characteristics included the teachers' inability to teach communicatively and grammar-focused examination pressure.

As a result, CLT did not gain popularity in the early 1990s. Hird (1995) states that the ELT in China is "not very communicative. And maybe that is just as well, because China is a vastly different English language teaching environment from the one that spawned and nurtured the communicative approach."

In Defense of CLT

In spite of the resistance, there were still many teachers in favor of CLT. Li was one of them. She was one of the first defenders of CLT in China who argued that using CLT would be of great benefit to ELT in China. Her article entitled "In defense of the

communicative approach" (1984) is the first one published in the *ELT Journal*, which had a big influence on teachers' attitudes towards CLT. The particular content of this article is the author's concern to break down the resistance to CLT engendered by decades of working within the constraints of structural grading and the consequent emphasis on language form rather than use.

Proponents of CLT regarded CLT as an innovation with many specific characteristics. CLT views language as a tool for communication. It insists that interactional speaking activities in classrooms be instances of real communication. It ensures that students have sufficient exposure to the target language. Therefore, application of CLT in Chinese classrooms would bring a positive effect on the part of the teachers, students and the government.

If CLT had not been introduced into China, not many teachers would have become familiar with this new trend in ELT methodology. Thus they might still be using the traditional method and would have had no knowledge of CLT. By introducing CLT, teachers were able to catch up with the modern development of English teaching methods in the world. They were able to come to the realization that teaching English is not only teaching grammar and the true mastery of a language involves communicative competence.

Because CLT aims at communicative competence, students might be more competent in the use of English for communication. A good level of English will help them considerably: to enter and graduate from university; to obtain better jobs, especially those in companies or joint ventures which have international connections; to read technical materials; and to study abroad. Also, China needs citizens with a superior level of English language proficiency. To have significant numbers of competent users of English in a whole range of professions, businesses, workplaces and enterprises has been seen by the authorities as a key element in China's opening wider to the outside world and the drive to modernization.

Measures to Support CLT

The key word underlying the resistance of CLT was "feasibility." The questions were, "Is CLT suitable for China? Can CLT be used feasibly?" Opponents of CLT held that CLT was neither possible nor feasible in China because of specific Chinese conditions. Proponents held different views and believed that there was indeed a possibility and feasibility of using CLT if there was a sweeping change of curriculum. The SEDC supported the proponents' view and took some measures to ensure that CLT was used effectively.

Teacher Training

One of the tasks was to raise the teachers' ability to do their jobs well. One reason to reject reform was the inability of the teachers. Chinese teachers are non-native speakers of English. Most of them, especially those in rural schools, lacked the average ability to listen to and speak English. Their low level of teacher education and language learning may reflect this deficiency. According to the SEDC investigation, in the 1980s, the percentage of secondary school teachers with BA degrees was only 28%, 12% of whom were Russian majors and 8% of whom were graduated with a 3-year BA program during the Cultural Revolution. Teachers with associate degrees and with secondary diplomas were 4% and 29% respectively (Zuo, 1990:34). So poor was their higher education that many teachers took in-service training in teacher's colleges and normal universities (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

Suggesting Using an Eclectic Method

An eclectic method is a method that accepts the best teaching techniques from other methods according to the actual situation. To be eclectic, teachers were required to use CLT as a method while accepting elements of the traditional method. As Rao (1996) states, it was the best method to reconcile communicative approaches to the teaching of English with traditional Chinese methods. The SEDC also pointed out that in the mid-eighties in some key schools in Beijing and Shanghai, there had already appeared a tendency of eclecticism so the teachers should follow this way towards eclecticism.

Stating Aims of Teaching English for Communication

The SEDC stated in the new syllabus that English teaching aims are: "by training in listening, speaking, reading and writing, to teach students in order to gain basic knowledge of English and competence to use English for communication." (English Teaching Syllabus, 1992, p. 1). The aims include the teaching of the four language skills for communication. To achieve this aim, the SEDC stated some guidelines:

- Teaching should start with listening and speaking

- Drills on language form should not be excessive
- English should be used in class
- Use of translation should be limited
- Audio-visual aids like realia, pictures, over-head transparencies, audio-tapes, videos, computers should be fully utilized
- The teacher's role should be a facilitator and helper to guide students to develop effective learning habits
- Teachers should be aware of the individual differences among students in the learning process
- Appropriate encouragement should be given to students to reinforce their initiatives. (ibid. pp.6-7)

Test Reform

Matriculation English Test (MET) is one National College Entrance Exams developed by the SEDC. Passing it to enter colleges and universities for further education is the most important consideration for secondary students. Before 1992, the MET test only had the "language usage section" to assess linguistic competence on phonetics, spelling, grammar and vocabulary. After 1992, the "language use section" was added to measure the four language skills used for communication such as listening to dialogues and answering the questions, reading comprehension and compositions. Thus it led teachers to teach to the test.

As a result of these measures, things changed for the better. More teachers were willing to accept CLT. In the mid-1990s, "there is now widespread awareness of more communicative approaches, though some eclectic compromise with Chinese approaches to language teaching is appropriate" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

Conclusion

When CLT was introduced into China, there were two views to the use of CLT. One view was that CLT was not feasible because of China's specific conditions. The other view was that CLT could solve the educational problems and meet China's needs. With regards to these views, the SEDC took a favorable attitude towards CLT and at the same time suggested methods to overcome the resistance to CLT. In the mid to late 1990s, the curriculum changed a lot to suit communicative teaching, and CLT became popular in China. Therefore, the educational authorities had a big influence on EFL teaching which made CLT to be accepted as a main teaching method in China.

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