

Communicative Competence Teaching in P. R. China

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I. The Concept of “Communicative Competence” in The Chinese Context

What is communicative competence?

Scholars and teachers may have different definitions of “communicative competence”. However, there is now a fairly broad agreement that communicative competence is made up of four major strands: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). It is clear that “grammatical competence focuses directly on the knowledge and skill required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances” (Canale, 1983); sociolinguistic competence involves the ability to produce and understand utterances which are appropriate in terms of the context in which they are uttered; discourse competence concerns the ability to combine meanings with unified and acceptable spoken or written texts in different genres; and strategic competence relates to the verbal and non verbal strategies which learners may need to use either to compensate for breakdowns in communication or to enhance the effectiveness of communication (Maley, 1984).

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Major features of the Chinese ELT context

English language teaching (ELT) has gone through many changes in the 20th century. Various ELT methods and techniques have been tried and used in China at different periods. Before 1978, English language teaching in China was largely text centred. Emphasis was laid on memorisation of vocabulary, grammar analysis and sentence translation. The teaching techniques in the classroom were exercisecentred and the training was narrowly limited to skills. Teachers focused very strongly on the language as language, strongly stressed accuracy and frequently felt insecure about their use of the language they were teaching. When the audiolingual method was introduced in 1964, it came as a welcome change but largely in methods, not in contents and learning strategies.

Responses to “communicative competence”

It was against this background that “communicative competence” in language teaching was first introduced into China in 1979. It was such a breath of fresh air, so useful and convincing in its arguments that it immediately attracted the attention of teachers of English in China. Throughout the 1980s, over 100 articles were written and published in journals and magazines with “communicative competence” as the focus of the discussion. Based on these articles as well as my personal experience as a teacher of English since 1976, I believe the Chinese teachers of English can be conveniently divided into three groups in their response to this new trend:

(1) The first group can be called "Enthusiasts". This group is composed of teachers and researchers who see the communicative approach as one that aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the necessary interdependence of language and communication (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:66). Such enthusiasts are using the word "competence" in a purely practical, pedagogical sense, meaning something that one acquires or internalizes, that enables one to do things, rather than something stored up in one's memory for talking about or writing about" (Li, 1990: 52 53). They believe that communicative competence consists of three components: formal and functional knowledge of language, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and language use abilities. In a paper presented at the International Symposium on Teaching English in the Chinese Context, Prof Li Xiaojun, a leading proponent of the communicative approach in China said, "We are not setting up this concept of competence as opposed to knowledge. We would indeed include knowledge in competence because knowledge does have a role in enabling people to communicate for instance knowledge of the formal linguistic system, knowledge about the rules and conventions of language use, and knowledge which provides a source and basis for the content to be interpreted, negotiated and expressed (Li, 1990: 53). Members of this group immediately accepted these new ideas and rapidly applied them in their curriculum and textbook development known as CECL (Communicative English for Chinese Learners a project for the development of a set of EFL materials sponsored by the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign

Languages and the British Council from 1982 to 1987).

(2) There are some teachers who consider "communicative competence" the goal of language teaching and who agree that the "communicative approach" has something meaningful and useful to offer to ELT in China. However, they are also aware that China tends to have a more structured, disciplined and classical way of conducting teaching. They do not favour a simple transplantation of the communicative approach to replace traditional or other existing methods, but seek a compromise or a reconciliation with traditional approaches. They believe that traditional approaches have done well in teaching students the linguistic competence and that the contribution of the communicative approach will be to cultivate students' communicative competence. The two different approaches are not in conflict at all, and can be combined together. This "weak version" of the communicative approach weak at different levels has become more or less standard practice in China because it "stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching" (Howatt, 1984:279).

(3) Finally, there are a number of Chinese teachers of English who "express polite interest" in communicative teaching ideas, but doubt whether such ideas would actually work in China. There are three reasons for their scepticism. (A) "Impractical". Some of them consider communicative competence

an ideal theory, whose influence is more on theoretical discussions than the adoption of practical methodological proposals. They take the view that it is much easier to talk about the communicative competence than to actually teach it. (B) "Impossible". Other teachers believe that, in teaching English as a foreign language in China, linguistic competence is more important. To them, linguistic competence is something we can teach and communicative competence is something we can't teach. It is a kind of ability that students will acquire, not learn. Like personality, each is different from the other. (C) "Unnecessary". Some teachers are used to the traditional methods, which, they think, have produced satisfactory results. They hold the view that as not very many people in China can attend universities, and those who do are the very best and are so motivated and intelligent that almost any method would work (Maley, 1984).

An ideal but complex goal

Today the term "communicative competence" has added important dimensions to the previous concept of competence in language teaching and has attracted attention from teachers of English in varying degrees. If we compare the major features of Chinese ELT context, it is clear that communicative competence teaching has different characteristics and emphasis. It will concentrate on use and appropriateness rather than simply on form. It will favour fluency-focused rather than simply accuracy-focused activities; emphasizing student interaction rather than teacher-centred direction and will stress the awareness of variation in language use rather than simply attention to the

language (Maley, 1984).

The attitudinal differences between these groups of teachers in the Chinese ELT context indicate that the implementation of communicative competence teaching in China is not just an issue of introducing communicative methodologies and techniques. It requires attention and effort both at the lower level of methodology and at the higher level of attitudes and beliefs. This highlights a potentially difficult problem or task in organizing syllabi, materials, classroom techniques, teacher development, testing design and other related activities.

I would like to point out that the persons responsible for ELT in China, both administrative and academic, are very clear about the situation. They have been working skillfully on this task and have achieved considerable progress.

II. The Practice of Communicative Competence Teaching in China

With the joint efforts of Chinese teachers of English and the people responsible for ELT in China, the importance of communicative competence has been recognized, accepted and included in the national syllabus of ELT, the communicative language teaching has developed and matured, numerous textbooks with communicative components have been published and various teacher training courses for communicative language teaching have been set up. Wherever you look in the literature or current journals today in ELT in China, you will find

references to the communicative nature of language classes. What did they do? How did they do it? Generally speaking, they have been working to make these changes take place in the following activities of ELT in China.

1. Revising the national syllabus for ELT in China

It is clear that in language teaching the goal of the programme and teaching objectives, which are incorporated in a syllabus, have a very significant effect on the contents and methodologies of the language teaching classes. During the 1980s, almost all national syllabi (syllabi for college English majors, nonEnglish majors and middle school pupils, etc.) for ELT in China have been revised to meet the social needs and incorporate new methodological ideas, chiefly communicative language teaching. The common feature of revision in all these syllabi is the inclusion of communicative competence in the goals of ELT. The inclusion is not just a simple introduction of the new idea, but a result based on careful investigation and decision of experts appointed for the task of the revision.

For instance, the revision of the National Syllabus for College English Majors in the Foundation Stage was based on 5 nationwide English tests of English majors during 1983-84. These tests were designed to find out the English levels of the English majors: (a) when they enter the college, (b) when they finish the 1st year and (c) when they finish the 2nd year. The analysis of the test results has furnished scientific statistics for setting teaching objectives in the new syllabus. The revision work was conducted by a committee headed by scholars from

China's key foreign languages universities and institutes and it lasted for 4 years. The new syllabus was approved by the State Education Commission and was put into effect in 1989.

I can talk about many features of this new syllabus, but the most relevant point to this paper is that communicative competence has been given a prominent treatment. Among the six appendices of the new syllabus are a 34page Appendix of Functions and Notions and a 24page Appendix of Communicative Competence. This new syllabus has then functioned in ELT for college English majors (the first two years in college) in China as a clear and authoritative guidance and strongly helped the development of communicative competence teaching and research.

2. Compiling and revising ELT textbooks

Textbook development in ELT was given considerable attention in China during the 1980s. A committee composed of leading professors of English was set up and 33 meetings were held to examine, evaluate and revise 36 sets of textbooks from 1981-1985 (Li, 1988:486). This greatly facilitated English language teaching and learning.

The inclusion of communicative competence in the national syllabus highlighted the change of attention from teaching the language system to teaching the language for communication. This change had its immediate effect on ELT textbooks.

A new generation of ELT textbooks were being prepared while the syllabus revision was under way. Here I would like to comment very briefly from the communicative point of view on 6 sets of textbooks, which are widely used in intensive reading

course for English majors in China.

Before the 1970s, there was only one set of textbook for English majors in intensive reading course. Now we have six sets and different schools can choose freely from them according to the needs or levels of their students. Of these six textbooks, *Communicative English for Chinese Learners* by Li Xiaojun from Guangzhou Foreign Languages Institute is specially designed for communicative language teaching both in its selection of materials and text design. *A New English Course* by Li Guanyi from Shanghai Foreign Studies University is a balanced mixture of traditional approach and communicative approach. It gives equal attention to and emphasis on fluency and accuracy, linguistic competence and communicative competence, studentcentred orientation and teacher's role as a facilitator. *Functional English* by English Department, Heilongjiang University is chiefly based on the functional approach and keeps pattern drills and situational teaching at the same time. Other three sets, *College English* by Hu Wenzhong from Beijing Foreign Studies University, *College English* by Zhou Shanfeng and Zhang Xiangbao from Peking University and *English* (for teachers' universities) by Huang Cidong from Shanghai Teachers' University have all adopted, either in the first design or in the revised edition, communicative language teaching principles in varying degrees.

This indicates that communicative competence has gradually been given a proper and prominent place in ELT in China, which greatly enhanced students' communicative competence.

3. Training teachers of English for communicative competence teaching

Teachertraining is clearly the key to teaching and future development. It becomes particularly important because the communicative competence teaching brings more challenges to the teachers of English in China, where English is a foreign language. To fulfil the task, the teacher, besides other qualifications, should also be able to use the language he is teaching fluently and accurately.

Teachertraining in China has made considerable progress during the 1980s. The government organizations and departments of universities have tried (1) to organize various teachertraining courses, (2) to send more promising teachers abroad to study in Englishspeaking countries, (3) to invite more visiting professors whose native language is English to teach in China. From 1980-1988, over 13,000 teachers received formal inservice training in applied linguistics and teaching methodologies. The teachertraining programmes, varying from 6months, one year to 2years, were organized jointly by some key universities in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities, and the British Council or organizations from U.S. and other English speaking countries. This, together with the presence of English native speakers teaching in China has greatly increased the teachers' own communicative competence and also made the implementation of communicative competence teaching an attainable goal.

When a new textbook is published, a one or two week teacher training programme, or even longer, will be organized to instruct and promote the use of the textbook. Many Chinese

postgraduate scholars returned from training overseas have also exercised considerable influence for enhancing the communicative competence and pedagogical change in ELT.

4. Introducing and using various classroom techniques

Unlike the idea of communicative competence, which was quickly accepted by teachers and researchers, the corresponding change in the classroom towards communicative teaching in China has been both gradual in speed and different in form. I would like to mention here the change in the exercise types in the classroom. The changes taking place in China seemed to move from exercisecentred activities to taskoriented, from isolated exercises to integrated and from purely linguistic drills to communicative or interactive activities.

For instance, now there are more paraphrase exercise than single sentence translation, more discussion on the understanding of meaning than grammatical explanation or analysis, more group discussion than memorization of structurebased dialogues, more oral presentation by the students than lecture on the linguistic points by the teacher. There are also some changes within certain frequentlyused exercise types, for instance, there is more dictation of a passage than dictation of individual words as in the past, there is more use of the cloze test less blank-filling in a single context-independent sentence, and more varied writing tasks instead of narrowly literary(essay writing) assignments. Though the change is not systematic, there are encouraging signs that such a shift in the classroom is taking place.

5. Creating an authentic learning environment

In China, the concern for authenticity in ELT was carried out in two different aspects: (1) using authentic English materials in classroom activities, and (2) making use of authentic materials from the environment. On the one hand, teachers started to use authentic materials in the classroom. For instance, instead of asking students to listen to recordings of the text, radio programmes from BBC, VOA, and, other radios broadcast in English are used in aural comprehension training classes. TV programmes in English education are also introduced into the classroom as the teaching materials for aural oral training, such as: *Follow Me*, *Family Album U.S.A.*, *First Step Abroad*, and *Visitors from Vancouver*. Some universities in Beijing also use films in English for the same purpose. On the other hand, students in China also benefit from the social change in the 1980s, i. e. China's modernization endeavours, which make accessible a great variety of exposures to authentic English situations. This includes English newspapers, magazines, advertisements, signs, and direct contact with native English speakers working in China or tourists from English speaking countries. In Peking University, and many other universities as well, there is a radio station broadcasting programmes in English, which can be easily tuned in by students on the campus. This not only helps build up the confidence of the Chinese learners of English but also reduces the gap between English from the book and English from actual communication.

6. Having various outsideclass activities for learners of English

Related to the authentic learning environment, different kinds of outsideclass activities are organized to encourage students to use English as communication. In the Department of English, Peking University and similarly elsewhere in China, we have "English Corner" for beginners of English, a weekly voluntary activity, organized by the English Club to enhance students' oral English. People come to meet at appointed time and place and practise their oral English.

The Department of English in Peking University regularly organizes "Speech Contest" or "Oral English Contest" and "Translation Contest" (from English to Chinese and from Chinese to English) among English majors and awards the top students. Sometimes debates, parties or performances are held and English is used as the language of communication. There are various kinds of activities for the students at different levels. Both teachers and students are clear that the aim for such activities is to enhance students' communicative competence.

We can now well conclude that communicative competence teaching in China is no longer just an idea, but is beginning to be undertaken seriously. However, the practice of communicative competence teaching in China seems more in attitudinal change, syllabus revision, curriculum development than in classroom activities, teaching techniques and methodologies. This could be described as change from the top down, and we can see that the change from the bottom up is equally necessary if the communicative language teaching continues to gain momentum in the future.

III. Issues and Problems Raised by Communicative Competence Teaching

The adoption and practice of a communicative language teaching is changing the face of English language teaching. It also "raises important issues for teacher training, materials development, and testing and evaluation" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:83). In the Chinese context, the issues include learning environment as well, i.e. whether communicative language teaching is equally suited to ESL and EFL situations. Here, I will briefly examine these issues and problems in the Chinese context.

Training enough qualified teachers for communicative competence teaching is still a decisive issue for ELT in China now. The issue is important in two aspects, quality and quantity. The word, "quality", refers to (1) teachers' own communicative competence, (2) their knowledge and belief in the significance of and (3) their skills in teaching communicative competence. In this way "teachers will be given the confidence to embark upon the uncertain waters of experimentation" (Maley, 1984:48). Lack of any of these three qualities will easily lead the teachers to go back to the traditional approach they are familiar with. The word, "quantity", means the large number of ELT teachers in China. This teachertraining project is, by any standard, a very demanding task.

Material development is another key issue for ELT in China. In language learning and teaching theory, communicative language teaching has a reasonable degree of theoretical

consistency. But "at the levels of design and procedure there is much greater room for individual interpretation and variation than most methods permit" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:83). This interpretational difference and variation will surely have its influence upon the material development, and then make it a difficult issue for teachers, who will select ELT textbooks. According to a survey of textbooks used in the intensive reading course in 20 English departments of Chinese universities, only one department is using CECL compiled by Prof. Li Xiaojun as course book. This does not mean that CECL is a failure. It is considered a very good textbook of the communicative approach. One possible reason for this problem is that these English departments have different teaching objectives and purposes of training. One set of CECL can not meet all their needs. Questions we can raise now include whether a communicative approach can be applied at all levels for all kinds of students in an ELT programme, how much competence we should teach through the textbook and how we can incorporate this into textbook development, and how suitable it is for nonnaive teachers.

The third issue is learning environment, which is essential for the idea of communicative competence teaching. English is taught in China as a foreign language. Students don't have as much English environment within which they can practise and develop their communicative competence as that of learners of English as a second language. Whatever the efforts we may have made, students are well aware that they are learning English in an environment where English is not natively spoken. The question is: shall we still give that much emphasis

on creating authentic environment or shall we make the distinction between EFL and ESL both in teaching objectives and in teaching methodologies? Or shall we teach the students nativelylike communicative competence in the learning environment? Or shall we teach them the basics and let them develop their communicative competence later on in real communication?

The last issue is testing and evaluation. Under the guidance of newlyrevised national ELT syllabi in China, remarkable progress has been made in English testing in China at different levels. With the inclusion of communicative competence in the national syllabi for ELT, there are significant achievements in the testing design, forms and item types. However, there are still some very challenging problems for the issue. They are: (1) some rather stringent criteria for the test design in the Chinese context, i.e. it has to test four kinds of competence, to be pragmatic and direct, and it has to use authentic language; (2) difficulty of administering the test for students in large numbers, especially when the type of the test is subjective; (3) washback effect of the test that does not correspond with the teaching syllabus or contents of the course, for instance, traditional test after communicative language teaching. Since there is an interrelatedness of language teaching and testing, communicative competence teaching can be more effective if these problems are solved.

To sum up, the practice of communicative competence teaching in the Chinese context is inevitable, desirable, complex and challenging. It is better developed in syllabus and curriculum design than in teaching techniques and methodologies. The essence of the issue, I think, is to incorporate the effectiveness

of the theory in the teaching objectives, continue the research and experiment in the practical issues and problems, and use the strengths of Chinese teachers and students. Then, the communicative competence of EFL students in China will be greatly enhanced.

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Abstract

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Over The last 20 years, "communicative competence", the languagelearning objective that has gained increasing currency throughout the world, has so profoundly influenced current thought and practice in language teaching that it is hardly possible today to imagine a language pedagogy which does not have a communicative component. In the P.R. China, there has been much discussion and debate about "communicative competence" and "communicative approach" in English language teaching since 1979, when this new trend was first introduced. The present paper attempts: (1) to explain what "communicative competence" means in the Chinese context; (2) to describe the practice of communicative competence teaching in China; and (3) to examine the issues and problems raised by this communicative approach.