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Communicative Language Teaching and Contextual Teaching and Learning: Challenges and Prospects in Chinese High- School English Education

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Abstract: This paper explores two widely employed language teaching methods in second and foreign language education: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), and analyzes their applicability in Chinese high-school English curriculum. CLT primarily focuses on developing students' "communicative competence", which encompasses linguistic, sociolinguistic, textual, and strategic abilities. CTL, on the other hand, emphasizes connecting academic knowledge to students' personal, social, and cultural contexts, helping them understand and apply what they learn in real-life situations. While the goals of both CLT and CTL align with the objectives of the Chinese high-school English curriculum, which aims to enhance students' ability to use language effectively in real-life contexts, there are significant challenges in implementing these approaches in practice. Major obstacles include an exam-oriented educational system, teacher-centered classroom models, large class sizes, and insufficient teacher training in both CLT and CTL methods. The paper concludes that although CLT and CTL have the potential to enhance students' language competence, their widespread and effective application in Chinese high-school English classrooms remains limited due to these barriers.

Keywords: communicative language teaching; contextual teaching and learning; Chinese high-school English education; exam-oriented education; teaching methods

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1. Introduction

There are numerous teaching methods available in language teaching. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) are two language teaching approaches which have been widely employed in second and foreign language teaching in recent years. This essay will briefly introduce and compare CLT and CTL in different aspects, then find that CLT and CTL meet the requirements of Chinese high-school English curriculum but may not be appropriate for Chinese high-school English teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

CLT is a teaching approach which helps students develop "communicative competence". There are diverse definitions of CLT from different researchers, but the main focus of CLT concepts is "communicative competence" which is aimed to achieve in a CLT class (Adem and Berkessa, 2022). "Communicative competence" includes the knowledge of language and the ability to use language in social context in different purposes (Zhang

and Wang, 2012). Furthermore, “communicative competence” is comprised of four skills which are: “language skill”, knowledge about language such as grammar and vocabulary; “social language skill”, using language appropriately in real life situations; “textual competence”, understanding and expressing the grammar structure and meaning of a text in writing and oral ways; “strategic competence”, the ability to make communication more effectively with language or nonverbal expression (Zeng, 2011). In order to develop “communicative competence” described above, CLT “emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task based activities, and communication for the real world and meaningful purposes” (Brown, 2007, cited in Pitikornpuangpetch and Suwanarak, 2021, p. 4). Following are some examples of teaching activities which can be adopted in an effective CLT class to help students develop communicative competence such as “role play” and “problem-solving” activity: in “role play”, students will be provided situations connected to their social life and asked them to prepare and perform role plays in groups, so students will negotiate with each other about the script and have conversations before they finally perform; in “problem-solving” activities, students will be given some social issues they know about and required to make solutions to the problems in group discussion, then each group will present their problem-solving answers in front of other groups to exchange ideas and make their positions (AL-Garni and Almuhammadi, 2019). Students are only allowed to speak target language as much as they can in order to fully participate in the learning process; if students are found to make mistakes while using target language, teacher will correct the errors later after the activities (Dos Santos, 2020). During the teaching and learning process of CLT, all those activities adopted such as conversations, discussions and presentations have positive effect on students’ “communicative competence”.

“Contextual teaching and learning is an educational process that aims to help students see meaning in the academic material they are studying by connecting academic subjects with the context of their daily lives, that is, with context of their personal, social, and cultural circumstance” (Johnson, 2002, cited in Halik, 2016, pp. 148-149). This definition connotes that the goal of CTL is to design and provide teaching activities and materials relate to real world for students, so that students can connect what they will learn to their own knowledge and experience to solve problems, which helps students learn well and realize the meaning of what they are learning (Nasir *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the process of a valid CTL class involves “questioning and inquiry”, “learning community and constructivism”, “authentic assessment” and “reflection”, and here is an example of the process of a CTL reading class: in first stage, teacher will provide students reading text related to students’ daily life, thus will attract students to study the materials and know more background knowledge about the materials; in “questioning and inquiry” stage, students will be required to read the text and formulate questions such as unknown words and grammar knowledge and questions generated by themselves while they are reading, then they will ask questions and find answers by free discussion with their classmates and teacher; in the stage of “learning community and constructivism”, students will analyse and discuss issues based on the previous stages and exchange their ideas and knowledge in groups to solve problems and to develop and build their own knowledge system; in stages of “authentic assessment” and “reflection”, students will be asked to outline and review the knowledge and skills they have achieved in the reading class and will be assessed during these stages (Haerazi *et al.*, 2019).

3. Discussion

From the above, we can see that CLT and CTL are two teaching approaches of different emphases but the goal and application of them are similar. The core of CTL is context and meaning. Because “context gives meaning to content. The broader the context within which students are able to make connections, the more meaning content will hold for them” (Johnson, 2002, cited in Aziz and Dewi, 2019, p71). And students will be aware of what

and why they learn language if they realize the meaning of new learning by linking it to what they have learned and experienced in social context(Refai, 2013). In contrast, the above paragraph has pointed out that the key point of CLT is “communicative competence” including four main abilities which is the goal of language teaching and learning. As mentioned above, one ability of the “communicative competence” is “social language skill, using language appropriately in real life situations”. Similarly, one requirement of CTL is that “students are invited to use language in the real context”(Aziz and Dewi, 2019 p79). Accordingly, the objective of both CTL and CLT is to use language effectively in different social contexts. Therefore, the teaching process and activities of CLT and CTL have similarities in many aspects in order to achieve the same goal. For instance, in CLT and CTL classes, there are same activities such as communicating and discussing in pairs and groups and solving problems based on “authentic materials”and real life context by students themselves; and students are encouraged and motivated to participate in all teaching activities, so the teaching process is student-centered and “teacher is a facilitator”(Natsir and Sanjaya, 2014, p59).

The same goal of CTL and CLT is in line with the aim of Chinese high-school English curriculum, but the two teaching methods are not widely used in Chinese high-school English class for reasons. The objective of Chinese high-school English curriculum is to improve students’ competence of using languages effectively in real life which is same with the aim of CLT and CTL as noted above(Sarab *et al.* , 2016). So the practice of Chinese high school English curriculum can use for reference the diverse teaching activities of CLT and CTL such as group discussion and the student-centered teaching process with “authentic materials” which help stimulate students’ English learning interest and help develop language competence. However, most teachers in Chinese high schools are still using traditional grammar explanation method of which the features are vocabulary explanation, grammar rules analysis, sentence making, and presenting the classroom teaching pattern of teachers-centered and students as passive recipients(Lou and Restall, 2020). This due to several reasons: the education test system is still exam-oriented assessment such as college entrance examination which focus on grammar and vocabulary instead of assessment matching CTL or CLT;so teachers’ teaching practice will be inclined to the exam-oriented teaching materials and process emphasized vocabulary and grammar and characterized by teacher-center rather than student-centered activities and “authentic materials” in order to help students pass exams;and there is no enough time for CTL and CLT activities such as group discussion because of limited time for English teaching in school curriculum and a large number of students in one class; besides, teachers don’t know how to implement CTL or CLT effectively because of insufficient training in CLT and CTL and inadequate language proficiency(Lou, 2021). To sum up, exam-oriented education traditions, large class teaching, and teachers’ inadequate language ability and insufficient training in CTL and CLT are barriers to apply CTL and CLT in Chinese-high school English class extensively and effectively.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, CLT and CTL meet the requirements of Chinese high-school English curriculum, because the objective of both CLT and CTL are same with that of Chinese high-school English curriculum which is to use language in real context effectively. CLT and CTL play a positive role in developing and enhancing students’ language competence because of the teaching process and activities of both CLT and CTL emphasized student-centered, using “authentic materials” and students’ independent learning by communicating, discussing and solving problems in pairs and groups. But neither CLT or CTL is suitable for a typical Chinese high-school English class characterized by exam-orient, teacher-centered, large class and teachers’ inadequate language proficiency.

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