

COMMUNICATIVE TEACHING METHOD  
FOR CHINESE ESL STUDENTS

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## Abstract

### COMMUNICATIVE TEACHING METHOD FOR CHINESE ESL STUDENTS

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The communicative teaching method is one approach to teaching second languages, and it sets communicative competence as the goal of language learning. A Chinese student lacks communicative competence even after studying English for many years. Therefore, it is necessary to employ the communicative teaching method in the Chinese ESL classroom. However, there are some limitations to conducting the communicative teaching method in a Chinese educational, cultural, and linguistic environment; these limitations include the syllabus of China, the examination system, and the teacher's abilities. Hence, how does a teacher conduct the communicative teaching method effectively to promote the communication competence within such limits? This is what many Chinese ESL teachers are eager to know. Therefore, this paper describes the meaning and the roles of CTM, then identifies the limitations present in the current Chinese ESL classroom, and lastly analyzes the way to conduct CTM in the Chinese ESL classroom based on the limitations examined.

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## **Introduction**

In the Chinese classroom, teachers usually conduct their teaching using a grammar translation method. They set linguistic competence as its desired goal, so many students cannot communicate in a foreign language even after they have studied it for many years. Studies in foreign language teaching from the perspective of sociolinguistics reveal that communicative competence is what a learner should finally achieve in the course of foreign language learning. With the development of cross-cultural communication between China and foreign countries, communicative competence has become more and more important. Therefore, it is necessary to develop students' communicative competence in the foreign language teaching field, given the new global communication.

A review of literature includes a report on the meaning of the communicative teaching method, on the necessity of conducting a communicative teaching method in the Chinese ESL classroom, and on the ways of conducting a communicative teaching method based on previous research. Surveys and studies have found that students can learn to use language appropriately in different kinds of tasks and to use language effectively in the social interaction with other people when using a communicative teaching method.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The problem expressed as a question is: how to conduct a communicative teaching method for Chinese ESL students so that students grow in second language acquisition?

## **Definition of Terms**

**CTM.** Communicative Teaching Method. It is an approach to foreign language teaching that emphasizes that the goal of language teaching is communicative competence.

**ESL.** Abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language (Retrieved on January 30 from <http://www.answers.com/topic/esl>).

## **Delimitations of the Research**

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville for eighty-eight (88) days. The primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host. ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and Google/Google Scholar will be the primary sources. Key search topics will include “communicative teaching method” and “ESL.”

## **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on the studies of communicative teaching method **for** ESL learners will be conducted. A second review of literature on how to conduct CTM in Chinese ESL classroom will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature**

### **The Meaning of Communicative Teaching Method**

According to Xiaoqing Liao (1996), the communicative teaching method focuses on communicative competence when a foreign language is taught. Communicative competence refers to the ability to use language to communicate. Richard and Rodgers (1998) have specified the four components of communicative competence: (1.) grammatical competence includes the understanding of grammar rules and the ability to use grammar rules correctly (Richard and Rodgers, 1998). (2.) Discourse competence refers to the communication of meaning within a situation (Richard and Rodgers, 1998). (3.) Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to choose language usage within a social context, including “role relationship, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose of their interaction” (Richard and Rodgers, 1998, p.71). (4.) Strategic competence includes “coping strategies that communicators employ to imitate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication” (Richard and Rodgers, 1998, p.71).

Ann Galloway (1993) holds that real-life situations should be used in the communicative teaching method, because it makes communication “necessary.” The teacher sets up a situation that students might meet in real life. For example, when teaching students a story about robbery, the teacher can divide students into groups and ask them to perform the story in different roles; and if teaching students the story about crossed marriage, the teacher can show students some related video clip. In this way, the teacher can hold the interest of students by keeping them in suspense with a reference to the result of the class exercise, which will be different according to their reactions and responses. A teacher can then set up different situations according to the chosen topic from day to day. In this way, students are motivated to learn because they are eager

to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful and suspenseful topics. In contrast the audio-lingual method of language teaching is based on repetition and drills (Galloway, 1993). For example, in the Chinese ESL classroom, teachers usually conduct their teaching in the following steps. First, guide students to read the new words of the text; secondly, ask students to read the text by themselves and pick out the places which they can't understand; thirdly, then the teacher paraphrases the text for students, and students take notes of grammar points when the teacher is explaining; fourthly, students do exercises to strengthen new words and grammar points. The repetition and drills are boring and makes students lose interest easily (Galloway, 1993).

From the standpoint of Margie S. Berns (1984), who is an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, language is not personal, but it's an activity among people. It is related closely to people and to society. So language study should focus on the use of language in context (Berns, 1984).

The following is a list of objectives included in the communicative language teaching of Celce-Murcia (1991, p.8):

- a. It is assumed that the goal of language teaching is the learner's ability to communicate in the target language. So during an English lesson, the teacher just organizes and observes the whole class, and students do most of the speaking.
- b. The content of a language course will include semantic notions and social functions and not just linguistic structures. For example, when teaching a story about crossed marriage, the teacher should not only teach the words, grammar points, and the text structure, but also develop students' insight into the crossed marriage and the culture difference showed by the crossed marriage.



- c. Structures are regularly worked in groups or pairs to transfer (and, if necessary, negotiate) meaning in situations where one person has information that the others lack.
- d. Students often engage in role playing or dramatization to adjust their use of the target language to different social contexts. For example, when students perform the story of robbery, the robber player has a line, “give it up, mother.” During this context, students would understand clearly and vividly that “mother” here is a very rude and offensive word, if used in this way.
- e. Classroom material and activities are often authentic to reflect real life situations and demands.
- f. All four skills are integrated from the beginning.
- g. The teacher’s role is primarily to facilitate communication and only secondarily to correct errors.
- h. The teacher should be able to use the target language fluently and appropriately.

### **The Roles of Communicative Teaching Method**

According to Xiaoqing Liao (1996), “It better reflects the nature of language and the process of language acquisition and learning” (Liao 1996, p.1). This is demonstrated by the following features:(1.) The CLT takes language as a tool for communication and holds that language should be learned through communication, so it initiates an utter reform against the traditional method which focused on grammar learning (Liao 1996). (2.) “The communicative approach insists that interactional speaking activities used in the classroom be instances of real communication, based on a genuine information gap” (Liao 1996, p.1). In this way, the activities in the classroom are made as realistic as the real situation (Liao, 1996). (3.) “The communicative

teaching method stresses two-way communication” (Liao, Xiaoqing 1996, P1), which is totally different from the traditional “one-way” teaching where a teacher repeats what the book says while students take notes quietly. Students are changed from passive recipients to active participants (Liao, 1996). (4.) Students have more opportunities to be exposed to the target language. They are encouraged to use language in order to communicate. During the process, their communicative ability can be promoted (Liao, 1996). (5.) The skills of listening, speaking, writing, and reading are all involved in the CLT practice. When students are communicating in a real world situation, they not only develop these four skills but also combine them together in use (Liao, 1996).

Richards and Rodgers (1998, p. 67-68) pointed out the features of Communicative Language teaching:

- a. Meaning is paramount.
- b. Comprehensible pronunciation is sought.
- c. Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning.
- d. Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible.
- e. The target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate.
- f. Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.
- g. Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.

### **The Current TESOL Situations in China**

The communicative approach was first introduced to China in 1977. In China it is known as the “functional approach.” The approach “was enlighten by the visit of professor L.G. Alexander in

1981 on a lecture tour to Shanghai, Beijing and Xi'an, demonstrating the Situational Approach”(Yao, 1993, p.76). With more and more resident lecturers from English-speaking countries coming to teach in China, the communicative method has become more and more popular in some aspects of English language teaching (Yao, 1993). Nevertheless, there are also some limitations to the communicative method in China, for example, the examination system. Students in China should pass the college entrance examination to further their higher education. This examination focuses on language knowledge. Translating and reading are regarded as important skills in language learning (Yao, 1993). Therefore, in China today the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method, the direct method, and the communicative method are used together and defended at the higher education level (Xu, 1993; Li, 1984). For example, we can enrich the college entrance examination content by including a knowledge part and a communication part. The knowledge part can be achieved by traditional methods, such as the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method, while the communication part can be achieved by the communication teaching method.

According to Liao Xiaoqing (1996), the current TESOL situation in China includes the following aspects: (1) *Teaching objectives*, Teaching objectives focus on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and on the basic English knowledge and communication competence. Based on this competence point, we should combine the communicative use and traditional use together for classroom use (Liao, 1996). (2) *National college entrance examination*, It is so important in order to determine the teaching method. Currently, it includes two parts. One part is language knowledge, which can be achieved with the help of the traditional method; the other part focuses on the four language skills that can be promoted with the proper employment of the communicative method (Liao, 1996). (3) *Teacher capacity*, Most Chinese teachers are not

proficient in listening and speaking. Many teachers cannot speak English throughout the whole class, so they usually use Chinese to help them to conduct class. In addition, there are still some teachers who employ the grammar translation method to teach English. Therefore, we should give teachers special training about CTM (Liao, 1996).

G. Ellis (1994) found that many teachers were not even exposed to the communicative approach, and they did not have enough background in the communicative approach; therefore, they did not use it. This situation is due to the historical factor. Most teachers achieved their English proficiency with traditional methods when they were students, so most teachers are not very proficient in communication and they are also not familiar with the communication teaching method. So when they are teaching, they usually employ Chinese to help them carry out the class. As to this point, teachers should learn the communicative approach as well as their general educational background (Ellis, 1994).

## **How to Conduct Communicative Teaching Method in Chinese ESL Classroom**

### **Teachers' Role**

According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), teachers in communicative classrooms must become active facilitators of students' learning. For example, when teaching a story about robbery to students, the teacher can ask students to perform the story in roles to hold students' interest. First, the teacher divides students into several groups with 4-5 members each group. Secondly, the teacher gives students several minutes to prepare; so during the preparation, students will read the text carefully and they will share their opinion about the story with group members; then, students practice their communication through performing. Last, the teacher makes a comment about student' performance. So, during the whole process, the teacher organizes the

exercise, then steps back and observes the students' performance, just like referee or monitor, because the goal is the students' performance. In addition during the communicative activity, it is far from quiet in the classroom, because students do most of the speaking and sometimes students are allowed to leave their seats to finish a task. It is an active scene in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

As Canale & Swain (1980) points out, the teacher should "take on an activating role as the instigator of situation which allow students to develop communication skills" For example, the teacher can give some reward to the winner group to encourage students to perform in roles; and the teacher should give some tips to students when they have difficulty in expressing in order to make communication continue and also give students confidence to speak (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.33). In this way, the classroom is not teacher-centered anymore. Teachers should not only give instructions to students, but they should also interact with students actively. Thus the teacher becomes the facilitator of the classroom (Canale & Swain, 1980).

### **Students' Role**

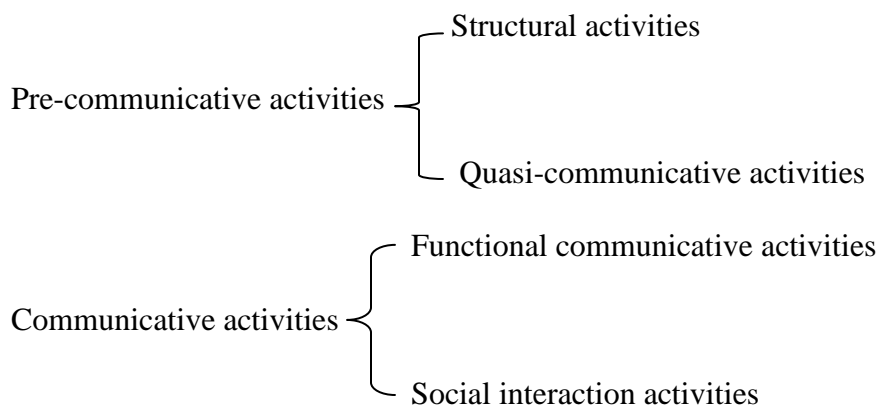
Larsen-Freeman (1986) has found "students, above all, communicators actively engaged in negotiating meaning and in trying to make themselves understood-even when their knowledge of the target knowledge is incomplete. They learn to communicate by communicating" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.131).

"Since the teacher's role is less dominant than in a teacher-centered method, students are seen as more responsible managers of their own learning" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.131). The communicative classroom is student-centered. Teachers just help students to get learning the method and then students learn to work and make it by themselves. For example, when students are preparing their performance in groups, they would be activated to learn the text by

themselves and share their opinion with group members. This is a more active and effective way for students to learn.

### Teaching Process

According to Brumfit (1980) the traditional process is “present - drill - practice in context,” but the communicative process is “communicate – present - drill if necessary” (Brumfit 1980, p.121). In this communicative procedure, Liao Xiaoqing (1996) points out that people doubt before ESOL students master enough knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar that they can use the new language to communicate effectively in non-English-speaking environment. For example, if students don’t make clear the difference between “ship” with “sheep” in sounds and cannot make right pronunciations of other words correctly, then how can they use “how about going to see the ship?” Therefore, we cannot conduct communicative practice before students master the skills of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (Liao Xiaoqing 1996). Littlewood (1981) uses his teaching model to illustrate that before the communicative activities were conducted that students should have the structural practice and quasi-communicative activity.



(Littlewood 1981, P86)

Based on this point, Liao Xiaoping (1996) considers it practical to think about how to combine the advantages of both the traditional procedures and the communicative procedures to solve the problem. Liao Xiaoping (1996) suggests the following six procedures: “Review – present – drill – communicative - drill in necessary - consolidation”(Liao, 1996, p.10). Specifically, the teacher reviews old lessons, and then begins new lessons. The teacher explains the pronunciations, forms and meanings of the new language as clear as possible; the teacher give students practice to consolidate the skills of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar; and the teacher organizes students to conduct various communicative activities based on the new items. Then according to the activities, teachers can know what students have not mastered. Then teachers can conduct corresponding activities and go on for consolidation their skills (Liao, 1996). Also, take teaching the story about robbery of two class periods for example; we can divide the 90 minutes into two parts. The first part, spare thirty minutes to review old lesson: (1.) Ask students to think about the key points last class (10 minutes). (2.) Complement the part which students haven’t recalled (10 minutes). (3.) Give students small quiz about the key points(10 minutes). In the second part, use the left 60 minutes to conduct the new lesson. (1.) Ask students to perform the story in roles (30minutes). (2.) After the performance, the teacher can know the parts which students don’t understand. The teacher can explain the parts or conduct some other activities to strengthen them. (30 minutes)

The aforementioned is just a general way to conduct the communicative teaching method. To promote the communicative competence effectively of students in China, Liao Xiaoqing(1996) pointed out that we should develop our TESOL method with Chinese characteristics. We should collect all the advantages of the existing methods and develop them into an eclectic method to promote the competences of linguistics and communication. By emphasizing communicative use

of language as well as cognition of language usage, we call it the “communicative-cognition method.” It must adhere the following principles (Liao, 1996): (1) “Develop both Linguistic competence and communicative competence” (Liao, 1996, p.29). (2) “Perform communicative activities and introduce the information gap” (Liao Xiaoqing 1996, P 49). (3) “Develop the awareness in Cross-cultural communication” (Liao, 1996, p.58). (4) “Use English as much as possible; use Chinese when necessary” (Liao, 1996, p.69). (5) “Ensure student-centered orientation and teacher’s role as a facilitator” (Liao, 1996, p.75). (6) “Develop and integrate all four skills with varying stresses on particular skills at different stages” (Liao, 1996, p.82).



## **Chapter Three: Conclusion and Recommendation**

This research addresses four issues. It includes a report on the meaning of communicative teaching method, the necessity of conducting the communicative teaching method in the Chinese ESL classroom, the limitations of conducting the communicative teaching method in Chinese ESL classroom, and the ways of conducting communicative teaching method based on previous research. Surveys and studies have found that students can learn to use language appropriately in different kinds of tasks and use language for social interaction with other people using the communicative teaching method.

Although the communicative teaching method can work well in some aspects, in other respects it does not function so well. First, we know that a small class size would be helpful in order to conduct communicative activities, but classes are often too large in the Chinese ESL classroom. Generally, classroom enrollment is between 60-80 students. This size will inhibit conducting communicative to some extent. Therefore, the teachers' choice of activities appropriate to large groups is important. Second, examinations are limited to the communicative approach being conducted in China, for example, college entrance exam and college English test of band 4, 6. Entrance into a Chinese college is based entirely on entrance exam scores. College students cannot get graduation certificate without passing CET band4. So passing these exams is really important in their life. A teacher's stress consists of making sure that students pass all kinds of government standardized exams; students also have stress to pass the exams by themselves. Those exams test mostly grammar knowledge and not communicative ability. Under this pressure, teachers are not willing to conduct the communicative method, and many students also don't accept this method. Conducting the communicative activities takes more time and it is focused on not grammar but on communication. Hence, teachers wanted more ideas on how to

improve the communicative competence within this limit. If these limitations can be avoided, then the ESL students benefit. Although the research did mention some obstacles existing in the Chinese ESL classroom, it did not mention the stressful nature of government exams on both teacher and student.

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