

Implementing Communicative Language Teaching in Chinese Local Secondary Schools to Teach Spoken English

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ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a Western-originated pedagogy emphasizing real-world communication and the development of second language proficiency in target language environments, offers a significant alternative to traditional methods like the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) that dominate English education in China. Despite the growing importance of spoken English, instructional practices in local Chinese secondary schools remain heavily influenced by exam-oriented systems, prioritizing the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking skills at the expense of students' oral fluency and practical communicative competence. This has led to the prevalent issue of 'dumb English,' where students struggle with confidence, accuracy, and fluency in spoken expression.

KEYWORDS

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Oral English proficiency; Chinese secondary schools; Exam-oriented education; Teaching methodology

1 Introduction

Motivated by classroom observations during an internship, this thesis aims to explore the effective application of CLT to enhance oral English proficiency in this specific context. By analyzing the existing practices and challenges associated with implementing CLT in Chinese and broader Asian secondary school settings, this study seeks to derive insights and practical suggestions. The ultimate goal is to contribute to improved teaching methods that not only boost students' oral expression abilities but also cultivate their capacity to apply English in genuine communication, thereby encouraging more innovative and effective approaches to English language education.

2 Introduction and background

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a widely used teaching method in English classroom teaching. As a type of teaching technique, it was introduced from the western countries. Compared with the traditional grammar translation method (GTM) and task-based language teaching (TBLT), which focus on reading and writing, CLT favours communication in real contexts and aims to develop students' ability to learn a second language in the target language environment (Zhong, 2023). The use of CLT is in line with the requirements of spoken English teaching and is beneficial to improving students' communicative competence (Yu, 2023).

In recent years, spoken English teaching plays an increasingly important role in Chinese secondary schools' education. However, under the influence of the exam-oriented education oriented by the high school entrance examination and the college entrance examination, the English teaching methods used in most local secondary schools in China tend to focus on the teaching grammar, vocabulary and test-taking skills, while neglect the cultivation of students' oral English application and practical communicative ability. Through my observation during my internship, I noticed that many local secondary school students are learning 'dumb English', which means they are only good at doing tests, but have difficulties in spoken English expression, lack of confidence and fluency. In addition, they ca not express themselves accurately. This situation promoted me to think more deeply about how to improve students' speaking skills effectively through more novel and unique teaching methods. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how to effectively use communicative language teaching (CLT) to improve students' oral English proficiency in Chinese local secondary schools. By analyzing and discussing the practice and problems of CLT in secondary schools in China and Asian countries, exploring some insights and suggestions that can improve the method of teaching spoken English to secondary school students in China, helping improve not only the ability of oral English expression, but also cultivating the ability of applying English to practical communication. Moving forward, educators need to continue to explore innovative ways of teaching English so that students can express themselves more confidently and improve their oral English skills effectively.

3 Current challenges for teaching spoken English through CLT in local secondary schools in China

3.1 Exam-oriented education and limitations of traditional teaching methods

One of the important challenges in teaching spoken English through CLT in local secondary schools in China is exam-oriented education and limitations of traditional teaching methods. According to Zhu and Shu (2017), CLT is based on the theory that the purpose of language teaching is to 'use' the target language and not just to learn to use grammar, which is a complete departure from the traditional language teaching programme. Previous researchers have viewed the testing factor as a real problem affecting the innovative implementation of language programs (Butler, 2011). In Chinese regular middle schools, English teaching primarily focuses on preparing students for the high school entrance examination and the college entrance examination, highlighting the limitations of traditional teaching methods. After investigating a survey to a township secondary school, Wang (2023) found that 63% of the students learn English because of test need, "many students continue to learn English for the purpose of getting a high score and coping with exams" (p. 49). The authors also state that most schools and teachers still focus their teaching on exams, "but oral test is not included in the test" (p. 49). In addition, most students seldom participate in English-related extracurricular activities and lack opportunities to practise spoken English. Sun and Asmawi (2022) believe that China's traditional education system is textbook-oriented and focuses on rote memorization, the potential drawbacks and limitations of this teaching method fade the enthusiasm of students' learning of spoken English. The authors also state that under the constraints of the current examination system, the speaking ability of students is often overlooked, and English teachers focus mainly on students' reading and writing skills in order to maximize their English scores, making it difficult for even excellent students to communicate fluently in oral English.

Although there are indeed challenges in spoken English teaching in Chinese secondary schools, they should not be regarded as obstacles to the successful implementation of CLT (Yang, 2014). Yang (2014) also suggested that English teachers should create opportunities for students to practice their oral English; through innovative teaching methods, such as adopting specific activities such as 4/3/2 activities, which means each speaker speaks three rounds, reduced from 4 minutes for the first round to 3 minutes for the second round and 2 minutes for the third round, can effectively improve students' oral fluency and make students more confident in speaking oral English.

However, Xi and Garland (2014) argue that simply adopting innovative teaching methods may not be enough to solve the underlying problems that hinder effective implementation of CLT. Frequent curricular innovations or changes in teaching materials can impose additional burdens on teachers, teachers have to spend more time preparing lessons and marking students' homework, which is a challenge for non-native English speaking teachers. In addition, there is no guarantee that curriculum reform will significantly improve the quality of education, the focus of curriculum reform has also been on developed regions (Yan, 2012).

3.2 Attitudes of teachers and students

Under the influence of exam-oriented education and traditional teaching methods, teachers and students generally misunderstand and despise the significance of CLT and spoken English learning. Yu (2019) finds that most secondary school students who live in rural areas lack interest and confidence in speaking English, their English speaking skills are poorer than those of urban students, and they are reluctant to participate in English classes and activities in many cases, especially in rural secondary schools. The author also point out that many teachers consider that their oral English level is not high enough, and they are more concerned with their students' scores, seldom use and teach spoken English in classroom. A similar situation also exists in South Korea. According to Li (1998), many teachers and students lack confidence in their speaking skills and give up using CLT in the English classroom. The author also note that the South Korean government wants to improve students' speaking skills by promoting CLT, while many parents and students are still only concerned with learning grammar and are unwilling to participate in class activities. Moreover, some teachers found it difficult to teach with CLT in secondary classes with large numbers of students (about 48-50) and grade students' oral English. According to William (2007), in the opinion of some teachers, CLT is just a lot of speaking activities without any grammar learning, which makes a lot of teachers feel upset, not only those from East Asian countries. Zhong (2023) points out in their research that parents' expectations of their children's high scores in exams also influence CLT and speaking instruction, as they may be concerned that students are improving their speaking skills while neglecting other skills such as grammar, reading, and writing.

Yu (2023) argues that teachers can change students' attitudes and improve their confidence in speaking English by changing their teaching strategies and creating a favourable English language environment. In addition, teachers themselves need to update their teaching concepts and use innovative teaching methods. In their research, the author also states that by designing extracurricular activities related to English, communicating with students in English more often after classes, and combining English with life, students' enthusiasm for spoken English learning can be effectively improved.

However, Xi and Garland (2014) observe that the implementation of CLT in Chinese secondary schools will face many challenges such as educators' resistance to change, inadequate teacher training, and curriculum restrictions. The authors also state that there is a relationship between student achievement and teachers' salaries and promotions, therefore, especially in 'ordinary classes', many teachers only "deliver CLT during demonstration lessons, teaching competitions and evaluations" (2014, p. 317) and continue to use traditional teaching methods in regular classes. These attitudes may weaken the enthusiasm and achievement of teachers and students in oral English learning, and then have a negative impact on oral English teaching.

3.3 Unbalanced distribution of educational resources

Another important challenge in using CLT to teach spoken English in Chinese secondary schools is the unbalanced distribution of educational resources, especially in the context of the unbalanced development of education between urban and rural areas. Educational resources are richer and more readily available in more economically developed areas, and schools located in these areas usually have better teaching and learning facilities (Hu, 2003). Yu (2019) acknowledges that China's urban and rural education development is very unbalanced, and suffers from a glaring gap in spoken English. The author takes Zhaocheng Middle School as an example and points out that rural secondary school students' speaking skills in English are generally poor, and the quality of English teachers in rural secondary schools is inferior, most of them do not have a high level of spoken English, they are not only unable to teach students correct pronunciation, but also lack creativity in their teaching methods. The saddest part about spoken English teaching is some teachers are not capable of spoken English. Furthermore, The schools do not have multimedia and other teaching equipment to help learn to speak English, either. Likewise, Yu (2019) points out that in many rural secondary schools, teachers are willing to teach students spoken English but lack multi-media and equipment; the teachers' and students' level of English is not sufficient to support oral learning. The author also points out that rural students lack the language environment and opportunities for practice in learning spoken English. According to Wang (2023), in township secondary schools, only a few teachers are able to teach in English. Yan (2012) point that the general lack of teaching skills among teachers is because of the limited formal training they receive, they "had little pedagogical training except for the teaching methodology course. But it was very theoretical" (p. 439).

In response to this challenge, Zhang (2013) suggests that the government should increase its investment in education, for example, by providing teachers with teaching materials such as videos, audio recordings and foreign magazines, reducing class sizes, attracting more talented teachers to join the teaching profession, providing more training opportunities and improving the overall quality of teachers. At the same time, teachers should give full play to their own initiative, tap students' interests and make creative use of the various resources available to meet students' communicative needs.

However, Hu (2005) argue that the economic capacity of the Chinese government is limited. Given the current level of development in China, the huge socioeconomic gap between urban and rural areas, the lack of educational resources and the large student population in the less developed regions, it will take several years for the socioeconomic conditions and educational infrastructure in the less developed regions to improve significantly. What's more, not all teachers are proficient in English and understand foreign cultures, and some students have limited English speaking level, making it difficult for them to participate in CLT classes (Zhang, 2023).

4 Solutions of challenges

4.1 Promoting educational reform and innovation in teaching methods

The first step is to gradually promote education reform and change the examination-oriented English teaching style in Chinese secondary schools. Li and Baldauf (2011) report that one of the main constraints on the use of CLT in Chinese secondary schools is the examination-oriented educational system, which prioritises scores and not only determines teachers' attitudes to curriculum reform and their choice of teaching methods, but also rigidifies the process of English language teaching and learning. According to Xi and Garland (2014), policymakers need to consider a more positive link between curriculum implementation and the evaluation of teachers and students, who need to see more clearly the benefits of following the curriculum. Moreover, Ma and Cheung (2018) report that it is understandable that many high schools in China may not be able to accept the CLT due to the need to prepare for the "gaokao", but it can be used at the junior high school level, where students are under relatively little exam pressure. Zhang (2023) believe that teachers must balance grammatical errors and training fluency, "avoiding extreme formalism or excessive leniency" (p. 176). Furthermore, there are some of the English learning methods in Malaysian secondary schools are worthy of our reference. Mangaleswaran and Aziz (2019) acknowledge that group activities such as role-playing, brainstorming, discussion and debates, and participation in English clubs give students more opportunities to speak English in order to improve their

speaking skills.

4.2 Teachers and students need to change their attitudes

Language is used for communication, dumb English is a big problem that needs to be changed urgently in Chinese local secondary schools (Wang, 2023). CLT has not been popularized in Chinese public secondary schools because of its emphasis on oral communication (Zhong, 2023). Yu (2019) believes that both teachers and students should change their attitudes and pay attention to learning spoken English. Speaking courses should draw students' attention to fluent expression, with emphasis on speaking and listening. Firstly, English teachers should play the role of a good guide, give the initiative to the students, stimulate students' interest as much as possible, and help them improve their spoken English (Wang, 2023); Secondly, in the class, teachers should not only speak more English themselves, but also encourage students to speak more English and correct their pronunciation in time; Thirdly, teachers can also organize and encourage students to take part in more English activities, use English movies to increase students' interest in English, and test students' English speaking level on time so that students will pay attention to oral learning (Yu, 2019). For students, they should learn English not only to score high in exams but also to communicate with others, actively co-operate with teachers in teaching and participating in English learning activities to improve their English proficiency. According to Lou (2021), students who are good at speaking English can act as 'little teachers' to help other students, which can effectively utilise group learning.

4.3 Adjusting the distribution of educational resources

The government should solve the problem of insufficient teachers and teaching equipment, such as regular training for rural English teachers, encouraging quality teachers to go to the countryside, and providing more teaching equipment for schools (Yu, 2019). In addition, Hu (2003) states that inter-regional cooperation should be strengthened so that secondary schools in less economically developed regions can establish cooperative links with excellent universities in economically developed regions and get help from these universities in training service teachers. Yu (2019) also pointed out in their research that the government could formulate relevant policies to encourage good English majors and English speaking teachers to country schools and give them advice, which could promote English exchange teaching activities between rural and township schools. In addition, the government should not only organize regular speaking training for English teachers in rural and township schools, but also solve the problem of backward teaching conditions and equipment, and improve the income of English teachers in rural and township areas. However, as Hu (2005) previously pointed out, there is a significant disparity in educational resources between urban and rural areas in China, and addressing this situation will be a long-term process.

5 Conclusion

This essay explores the challenges and strategies of implementing CLT in Chinese local secondary schools to teach spoken English. According to Zhong (2023), if people cannot speak a language concisely or express themselves correctly in the target language, it means that they have not succeeded in mastering the target language. English teaching should focus on listening and speaking, supplemented by reading and writing (Wang, 2023). In most Asian countries, the focus of English language programme objectives has shifted from language knowledge and skills to communicative language competence (Li & Baldauf, 2011). Although there are many challenges such as the constraints of exam-oriented education, unbalanced distribution of teaching resources, and large class sizes, CLT can be successfully applied in the English classroom in the Chinese cultural context to help students increase their confidence in speaking English and their interest in learning English. These positive findings suggest that Chinese secondary school students can actively participate in the classroom through learner-centred CLT and gain more opportunities to speak English (Ma & Cheung, 2018). With the reform of the college entrance examination and the promotion of quality education, spoken English has also been included in the examination items and has been gradually valued. In this era of globalization, spoken English education in Chinese local secondary schools should not only be limited to the examination, but should also focus on practicality and be in line with the international standard, and learn from the advanced experience of other countries, so that secondary school students can better learn English for the sake of better communication using English, instead of learning English only to cope with exams.

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