

Principles of Second Language Methodology: Teaching Listening With Communicative Approach to Adult Learners

Zhou Min

Associate Professor Foreign Language Department, Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhejiang, P.R.China

Corresponding Author: Zhou Min

ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses the importance and difficulties in teaching listening to adult students. By outlining the definition and features of Communicative Approach, the paper recommends how to integrate Communicative Approach with listening in the course design, the curriculum, the syllabus, listening materials and the assessments. The literature review's findings indicate that the flexible adoption of Communicative Approach can improve students' listening competence and gain better teaching results.*

KEY WORDS: *Listening teaching, Communicative Approach, Second Language Methodology*

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I. INTRODUCTION

An efficient and appropriate teaching approach is an important requirement for both language teachers and learners in Chinese universities and colleges. Over the decades, various second language approaches to teaching listening, including the grammar-translation approach, the direct way, the situational language teaching, the audio-lingual approach and the communicative approach, have been used on Chinese university students (Hu, 2005). Although it is generally recognized that listening is a significant aspect of language learning, Vandergrift (2003, p.464) indicates that 'listening comprehension remains a "young field" that merits greater research attention'. Therefore, this literature review aims to assist teachers to choose suitable teaching approaches, by analysing the effectiveness of communicative language teaching (CLT) in listening teaching at Chinese tertiary levels. The paper begins with introduction of a historical background, and then discusses the importance of listening teaching. After outlining the definition and features of CLT, the paper recommends some applications which integrate CLT with listening in the curriculum, the syllabus, the course design, listening materials and the assessment. The literature review's findings indicate that the flexible adoption of CLT can improve students' listening competence and gain better teaching results.

II. THE CONTEXT

This part outlines a historical listening teaching background, and introduces traditional teaching methods used in China. Within a historical perspective, listening teaching approaches have undergone many changes over the centuries. Since the classical Greek and Medieval Latin periods, with only a few textbooks provided, a target language was taught mainly by aural methods. In the early trends of language teaching, listening was chiefly used as models to present new grammar (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Field, 2003). During World War II, due to the military's need, an audio-lingual approach was found in the USA (Field, 2002). At the same time, an oral or situational approach in listening were developed in the UK to assist soldiers to speak and understand foreign languages (Field, 2002). In terms of second language teaching in China, listening has not been regarded as a separate skill until the late 1970s (Hu, 2005).

In China, grammar translation methods play a dominant role in English teaching (Hu, 2005). The language learning environment in China has long been described as "test-orientated" and 'teacher-centered' (Anderson, 1993, p.476) and listening teaching has no exception. The listening learning environment in university classrooms can be described as: a large group of students, less authentic listening materials, high test pressure, and few opportunities to use the language in real life (Chai, 1999). As a result, students are accustomed to devoting more time in fulfilling curricular requirements by memorizing words, analyzing sentence structures and taking model exams, rather than participate in open discussions, or exposing themselves to a broad cultural situation (Lee, 2002; Gao, 2006). As a result, listening remains a relatively weak field which needs a lot more attention in college English teaching. A survey from Gu (2009a) proves that Chinese undergraduates are handicapped in listening. He investigates 768 East Asian international graduate students in US tertiary institutions on their view about academic communication. In his finding, Chinese undergraduates are described as 'silent' or 'reticent' in classroom and 'did not have enough listening/speaking proficiency to be able to communicate effectively' (Gu, 2009a, p.310). Moreover, Gu finds listening comprehension is one of the most

important skills for those international graduates to achieve.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING LISTENING TO ADULTS

Rost (1994, cited in Peterson, 2002, p.87) describes the significant of listening as 'listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner'. For the twenty-first century, listening is indispensable in second language teaching at tertiary and graduate-levels in China, because this communicating skill matches the needs of learners, institutions, and China's social development.

1. Institutional needs

Achieving proficient listening skills and strategies is a crucial necessity in the national curriculum. *The College English Curriculum Requirements* (Ministry of Education, PRC. (MOE), 2007, p.1) highlights the importance of teaching listening as College English teaching is 'to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking'. From a listening teaching perspective, the national requirements set three different stages in listening skills and strategies: basic, intermediate and higher levels, as the learning environment of Chinese institutions vary a lot (MOE, 2007). The minimum level which listeners should achieve before graduating is to be able to understand classroom instructions, short dialogues, lectures, to grasp main ideas of English radio and TV programs at a speed of about 130 to 150 words per minute, and to use basic listening skills to real life situation (MOE, 2007). Teachers and administrators in institutions of mainland China should follow the guidelines by designing listening courses based on College English teaching. Two-year listening courses are compulsory in College English teaching. At the end of the course, students need to pass a national examination in order to achieve their degree.

2. Testing Pressure

College English Test (band4 and band6) in China is administered by the Chinese Higher Education Department. The listening section of this test evaluates the students' abilities to understand oral conversations or passages based on standard American English or standard British English (*Syllabus for College English Test*, 2006, p.3). The test scores reflect the candidates' English proficiency level, thus affects students' educational promotion and employment prospects (Rao, 2002). The motivation of students practicing listening is partly due to this test pressure. A research finding from Gao (2006) involving learning strategies of Chinese undergraduates supports the ideas that students are interested in practicing listening because the College English Tests (Band 4 and 6) have listening comprehension session (Gao, 2006). Teachers and administrators are tremendously affected by the results of the CET as well as the students. Zheng & Cheng (2008) further add to this by saying that Chinese teachers feel personally responsible for help students to score well, and administrators are expecting higher marks in CET for better results indicate better teaching quality.

3. Social needs

Within a second language perspective, improving listening skills is important because this language proficiency benefits students in their academic studies, overseas opportunities and future work prospects (Li, 2007). To add this to educational context, Peterson (2002, pp.87-88) further explains that listening is 'the main channel for information, culture, and language input' and the process of listening is a 'multilevel' and 'interactive' with 'meaning creation'. Gao (2006) addresses the benefits of listening for Chinese students' overseas learning, that is, listening is crucial in helping students to achieve academic and real life success abroad. A good listening proficiency is supportive of students' happiness in English-speakers' communities.

IV. DEFINITION OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

Celce-Murcia (2001) describes the purpose of communicative language teaching is to improve students' communicative competence rather than simply teach grammar and structure of a language. VanPatten (2002, p.1) defines the communicative approach as a teaching approach that sets communication as its goal. Richards (2005) highlights the features of CLT practices as follows: the approach considers at second language teaching as a kind of interaction and meaningful communication. Learners are expected to be able to use the target language with accuracy and fluency. Teachers are regarded as a guide or a facilitator. The learning process and progress have different rates to match different needs and motivations of learners. Classroom learning tasks and exercises are designed for providing more communication and negotiation opportunities for students and to expand them with wider language resources. Celce-Murcia (2001) agrees that in CLT the traditional way of teaching, which focused on grammar or forms, has been replaced by a focus on semantic notions and social functions, that is, on meaning. Currently, the communicative language teaching approach is in vogue in second language teaching, particularly in teaching listening and speaking.

V. APPLICATIONS OF CLT IN TEACHING LISTENING TO CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Comparing with previous grammar-based approach, the communicative approach is more supportive of teaching listening in Chinese context. The following section discusses recommendations for applying CLT to the curriculum and the syllabus, the college English listening course, listening materials, and the listening assessment in China's higher education level.

1. In the curriculum and the syllabus development

In the requirements of *College English Curriculums*, students are expected to communicate effectively after a compulsory two-year-full-time listening course (MOE, 2007). As the listening syllabus states, with two years' listening learning, students are expected to understand daily conversations, grasp main ideas of lectures, English radio and TV programs, and conduct basic listening strategies to facilitate comprehension (MOE, 2007). However, at the secondary level, listening teaching is less emphasized. In primary and high schools, listening teaching is not a spare course, and direct assessment of listening is avoided in China's National College Entrance Examination (Li & Song, 2007). Therefore, the foundation of English listening to Chinese undergraduates is relatively weak, and listening teaching is a great challenge to Chinese university teachers.

Taking into account the features of CLT and the national curriculums requirements, the communicative approach is suitable to serve institutional and learners needs. Fields (2008) says once listening encountered in appropriate approach, learning efficiency can be highly promoted. The aims of CLT are to help listeners communicate more effectively, and to develop students' language competence. Teaching models based on CLT can combine listening with general culture, and involves learners as active participants in learner-centered environment. For further add to this, Lee and VanPatten (2002, p.195) features that listening is 'a communicative act'. The quote supports the idea that CLT is suitable to Chinese national requirements, for it match the practical function of teaching English for future use' (MOE, 2007).

2. In the college English listening course

Comparing with the traditional teacher-centered pattern, CLT is more dynamic and practical in designing classroom activities. Learners gain success in language proficiency within a combination of 'collaborative and non-collaborative listening' (Lee and VanPatten, 2002, p.195). To encourage independent and collaborative learning, the following applications are suggested in listening classrooms: 1)organizing listening tasks by discussions, debates, presentations, interviews, and games, instead of only using multiple choices questions, short-answer questions, and true or false statements; 2)using interactive listening skills, including Imitating, repetition, prediction, note-taking, memorizing main points, summary, selecting specific detailed information; 3)integrating group work with individual performance; 4)providing opportunities for computer-mediated communication, such as online listening; 5)using internet, multimedia equipments, computer-labs to assist teaching in listening classroom setting; 6)personalizing listening content with students' own interests and needs.

Various group discussions and interactive classroom activities are recommended because 'collaborative and non-collaborative' classroom tasks, as supported by Lee (2002, pp.195), can motivate students and help them overcome reluctance and reduce anxiety. Moreover, learner-centered listening course encourages students to take responsibility for their own study, thus provides students the opportunity to become independent where they can use English for purposes appropriate to their interests. In addition, repetition, prediction, note-taking are frequently adopted in listening for these skills can serve as a way to divide up short sections connecting speech into individual words, and thus help students to grasp key words and to reinforce pronunciation and comprehension. Summaries, debates, and pair-work are employed since these activities play a positive and beneficial role in extracting meaning and providing appropriate feedback, and then promote listening comprehension. In fact, integration of CLT to English language teaching at various institutional levels has been made since the approach was introduced in the late 1970s (Hu, 2005; Yu, 2001; Zhang, 2006). Later on, CLT has gradually become popular in second language teaching and has been confirmed by educators that it is an effective teaching method especially in teaching listening/speaking (Li, Song, 2007, p62).

3. Teaching materials

In terms of authentic materials, CLT is an interactive and suitable method which benefits both teachers and learners. In China' language teaching context, listening textbooks are crucial sources of input to learners at all levels (Hu, 2005). To help students to adopt real life communications, course contents with authentic materials and clear contextualized activities are highly attractive to 'the text book market'(Hu, 2005, p.14).The first CLT-informed textbook was *Junior English for China* (Adamson & Morris, 1997, cited in Hu, 2005). Although it was for secondary students, it still won its popularity for the lessons were organized not on grammar, but on topics 'covering culture-specific activities, cross-cultural information, scientific knowledge, and ethical behavior' (Hu, 2005, p.14). Later on, teaching materials with communicative competences come into fashion.

Many major overseas publishers, such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, MacMillan Education and Pearson Education, have been trying to take a share of the market by seeking Chinese partnerships by publishing in China (Hu, 2005). With listening materials perspective, a series of listening textbooks, including *Listening to this*, *New College English: Viewing Speaking and Listening, Step by Step*, *Cambridge IELTS*, have been very influential as they are pressed by in collaboration with overseas publications and the People's Education Press. Obviously, these textbooks are informed by a new pedagogy of communicative competence and stimulates learners feel they can learn real English. Everyday conversations, lectures, radio or TV programs from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of American (VOA), and Cable News Network (CNN) are recorded in these supplementary listening materials. Cassette tapes, videos, audio and CD ROMs are common part the books. Learning could be more interesting and more authentic with those truly proficient English listening material.

4. Assessing listening with CLT

Two tests model are commonly used in assessing listening, one is achievement tests during mid-term and at the end of the listening course; the other is the national English test (CET band4 and band6). However, Assessing listeners' achievements and proficiency is limited, as Lee and Field (2001, p.101) suggest, 'the process of listening is a psycholinguistic and communicative act', which needs communicating in meaning. Therefore, measurements on students listening progress are suggestible. A view of Peterson(2001) support this suggestion. He says listening comprehension is a 'multilevel, interactive process of meaning creation' (Peterson2001,p.88). One form of assessment can be taking 'learning profile'(Foong, 2005,p.33). For example, students' attendance, class participation and in-class assignment and after-class listening can be taken into count in listening process. The second suggestion is collaboration with 'peer-evaluation' and 'self assessment'(Foong, 2005,p.33). The view is supported by Gass (1997. p.131-132): interaction between learner-learner and teacher-learner is a means of 'facilitator'; learners receive feedback on their own production; hence 'input can become comprehensible and manageable'. In addition, Self assess is an efficient way to provide listener the opportunity to become independent. They can choose listening materials from each listening skill which they need and would like to work on.

5. Limitations

Although CLT has been advocated and implemented in universities and colleges, challenges still exist in teachers' training and real practice. The first common difficulty lies on understanding more about listeners. It is important to investigate what good listeners do and how they learn the listening strategies, since the learning styles, personality types, pervious social, cultural backgrounds, and affective factors influent listeners' language proficiency(Peterson, 2001). Secondly, local practice of CLT approach in Chinese classrooms is limited. Considering teachers' own misunderstanding of CLT and variations in class contexts such as resources, size of classes and students' individual differences, CLT can be implemented in narrow stages (Hiep, 2007). Thirdly, Many teachers mistakenly associate the method with the ability to communicate orally (Zhang, 2006), and tend to hold a certain belief that the communicative approach is opposed to grammar ability. In addition, a survey by Hiep (2007) finds teachers' training programs organized by government overemphasize student-teachers' mastery in the target language and ignore the integration the theoretical tenets with CLT practice.

VI. CONCLUSION

Given the knowledge base this paper draws upon, the question of whether CLT is an effective approach in teaching listening to Chinese university students can largely be answered in the affirmative. The findings of the literature review indicate that CLT is effective and supportive of listening teaching in Chinese context, with its principal focus on being able to understand and communicate with native speakers in "real-life" situations, and matches the needs of Chinese institutions, learners and social perspectives. But there is no guarantee that a single method can fully address all around needs of teachers, learners. Teachers in the context of Chinese universities are capable of determining, developing and innovating classroom techniques appropriate to their conditions.

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