



Applying Communicative Language Testing to Enhance English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract. Compared with traditional English testing approaches, Communicative Language Testing (CLT) places greater emphasis on the practical communicative value of English instruction. It advocates a student-centered teaching philosophy. Furthermore, it effectively improves the innovation, practicality and effectiveness of English teaching. The above characteristics of Communicative Language Testing enable it to exert a remarkable effect in English teaching at higher vocational colleges. On this basis, this paper elaborates on the historical evolution and significance of Communicative Language Testing. Combined with the traits of English teaching in higher vocational colleges, it puts forward three practical suggestions, so as to optimize the teaching effect and improve vocational college students' comprehensive English learning competence.

Keywords: CLT; higher vocational college; English Teaching

1 Introduction of CLT

The theoretical basis of CLT lies in the concept of “communicative competence,” initially proposed by Dell Hymes in 1967 in response to the limitations of Noam Chomsky’s focus on grammatical competence^[1]. The theoretical basis and development of communicative language testing is closely related to that of the linguistic theory.

1.1 Theoretical Basis and Development Process of Communicative Language Testing

1.1.1 The Core of Communicative Language Testing.

The core of communicative language testing is the theory of communicative competence, it was first put forward by the famous American social-linguist Dell Hymes in 1972. Then it was reinforced by the Canadian scholars Canale and Swain in the 1980s, while in the 1990s another American scholar Bachman made up the theory. What the three scholars had set forth represented the main stages of communicative

language testing. The main task of communicative language testing is to evaluate the students' communicative competence.

1.1.2 Bachman's Theory of Communicative Language Competence.

In 1990s, the well-known American applied linguist Bachman developed the communicative competence pattern of Canale and Swain, and put forward a new mode, which was appreciated as the "milestone in the history of language testing" by others, "Bachman's theory of communicative language competence is the most sound and complete one of all the doctrines about language competence". The theory of Bachman solved the problems of *How to test*, and *What to test*, also, it set aside the assessing principle of communicative language testing.

Bachman's theory of language competence was based on the fruits of Halliday and Hymes, and it mainly focuses on the following two: Language competence should include the grammatical knowledge and the knowledge of how to achieve the communicative goal. The processing of language is a dynamic course, the components of language competence are interrelated.

The knowledge construct refers to the language users' social-cultural knowledge and that of the world. The context of language use includes the two sides who are communicating, it also includes situations, topics and goals of communicating. Bachman believes that communicative language competence includes three parts, as are language competence, strategic competence and psycho-physiological competence. All the above three can be detailed analyzed into subtle deviations. The pattern of Bachman's communicative language competence updated the old system of other scholars, it surely had great effect on foreign language teaching and testing for the near decades.

2 Features of Communicative Language Testing

The jargon of the communicative testing movement, has impacted upon the ways in which language testers approach problems today^[2].

2.1 Authenticity

CLT requires that test tasks be as naturalistic and authentic as possible, replicating real-life language use activities^[3]. If the communicative language testing wants to show the real communicating needs, the two sides who are communicating must have information gap. They need to have to desire to communicate, from communication, both of them get the information they wanted.

2.2 Functions

Communicative language testing emphasizes the linguistic tasks, only if the purpose of using language is to fulfill some function. Such as asking for others' comments about something, asking for directions and getting information from others.

2.3 Interactiveness

What we called interactiveness here refers to the intercommunication between testers and test takers, or that among test takers themselves. The two sides who are communicating need to change roles often, such as from listening part to the identity of speaking or from speaking to listening, no matter in what situation, they have to keep in mind the information the other side needs.

2.4 Contextuality

The so called contextuality means that the language testing is put in a set situation, it regulated the roles the two sides need to play. The test takers have to respond to the demands which is proper to his identity, only from this way can we look deep into the suitability of language.

2.5 Complexity

Complexity means when we are going to give scores to the test takers, we should have a complex look of how they have fulfilled their tasks. That's to say now matter correctness, suitability or fluency are all to be taken into consideration.

3 Principles of Communicative Testing Assessment: Consistency and Usefulness

3.1 Consistency

In the book *Language Testing in Practice*, Bachman and Palmer put forward that, when we are going to design, develop a language test, we should make sure that the language testing activities should be consistent with the real situation of language task. We should take into considerations that the features of language use tasks are consistent with that of the language testing. Next, we should make sure that the features of language users are consistent with that of the test takers. Thus we can make conclusion of the degree of these features which take part in the language use tasks and testing tasks.

3.2 Usefulness

The main problems of language testing theory is the criterion and principles on how to evaluate a test. Many linguists agree that validity, reliability and practicality is the criterion on all language testing. As we all know, the most important of the above three is validity, it is the starting point of a language test. While, Bachman and Palmer believe that the above three are not enough for assessment, they continue to put forward the feature of usefulness of language testing. In their opinion, usefulness of language testing includes the following aspects:

3.2.1 Reliability.

Reliability refers to the credibility and stabilization of the test results, it means that if the same group of students are tested more than once, and the tests are of the equal difficulty, their scores should be consistent with each other.

3.2.2 Construct Validity.

Construct validity refers to the basic ability or feature of the language competence theory. If one test can show that it can evaluate one construct of a theory, it is said to have construct validity. There are two ways to analyze the construct validity of one test: the approach of qualifying and that of quantifying.

3.2.3 Authenticity.

Bachman and Palmer named authenticity “the degree of consistency of one testing tasks and that of the targeted language in real use.” Though as one criterion of language testing assessment, authenticity is always neglected by language users and linguists. In fact, authenticity can help us make reference of the test takers’ language ability according to their scores, also, authenticity may affect the students on how they will perform in the test. Of course, tests with high authenticity will inspire the students’ active responses towards testing tasks, thus to help them get their prime level. From this aspect, authenticity and face validity have the same functions.

3.2.4 Interactiveness.

Bachman and Palmer believe that interactiveness refers to “the degree and varieties of test takers’ characteristics in fulfilling one test task”. The most important personal characteristics related to language testing include: linguistic competence, language knowledge and meta-cognitive strategies, topical knowledge and affective schemata.

3.2.5 Impact.

The impact of language testing refers to the feedback of language testing on language teaching, which may be active or negative. In foreign language teaching, the students are usually taught according to what they will be tested. That will surely cause negative effect. To minimize this effect, one important approach is to adjust the testing manner, it implies we should try our best to draw near the features of test tasks to that of teaching project.

3.2.6 Practicality.

Bachman and Palmer named practicality “the relations between the resources in designing, developing a test and actions in utilizing these resources”. The main resources are human resources, material resources and time.

4 English Teaching in China's Higher Vocational Colleges

4.1 Characteristics of English Learning in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

4.1.1 Apparent Career Orientation in Learning Motivation.

Different from undergraduates, students in higher vocational colleges possess a strong sense of career awareness. They demonstrate higher learning enthusiasm when English teaching content is directly correlated with their future careers. Conversely, learning motivation declines markedly if the curriculum is overly academic or disconnected from their majors. Such prominent career orientation indicates that the general English teaching model cannot be mechanically applied to higher vocational English instruction, which needs to be closely integrated with professional demands.

4.1.2 Uneven English Foundation and Fragmented Grammatical Knowledge.

Most higher vocational college students rank below the average in English proficiency due to college entrance examination selection. Their grammatical knowledge is characterized by fragmentation: some grammatical rules are memorized but cannot be applied flexibly in practical communication. Students have accumulated a certain vocabulary bank, yet most words are passive vocabulary that can only be recognized rather than used actively. Influenced by local dialects, their pronunciation and intonation are suboptimal, resulting in low self-confidence in oral expression. Such learning predicament leads many students to develop learned helplessness in English learning.

4.1.3 Strong Practical Competence and Relatively Weak Abstract Thinking Ability.

Higher vocational students excel in hands-on operational capabilities and prefer learning by doing. They tend to lose interest in pure theoretical lectures but show great willingness to participate in task-based activities set in authentic simulated scenarios. This learning trait is highly consistent with the core concept of communicative language teaching that advocates learning communication through actual communication, laying a solid foundation for the implementation of this teaching approach.

4.1.4 Insufficient Students' Participation.

Vocational English teaching faces numerous bottlenecks, making it difficult to implement high-quality English teaching and carry out effective teaching for students in vocational schools^[4]. For example, only a small number of students with solid foundational knowledge are willing to take the initiative to speak, while the majority remain silent due to insufficient self-confidence and fear of making mistakes. Without effective intervention, low classroom participation will turn teaching into a one-man show of a few top students, making it impossible to achieve the goal of cultivating communicative competence for all learners.

5 Methods of Integrating CLT into Higher Vocational English Teaching

5.1 Restructuring Teaching Content from Grammar Syllabus to Task-based Syllabus

Communicative language teaching proposes that language teaching should be organized around communicative functions and practical tasks instead of following the sequential arrangement of grammatical items. In view of the career-oriented learning feature of higher vocational students, the restructuring of teaching content can be conducted in the following approaches. First, conduct job demand analysis to define core communicative tasks. Teaching teams are supposed to conduct in-depth enterprise research to identify practical English communicative tasks required for students of different majors in future occupations. Second, reorganize unit structure based on tasks. Traditional textbooks arrange each unit in the order of dialogue, vocabulary, grammar, exercises and reading. By contrast, units under communicative language teaching should center on one core task. Third, develop authentic teaching materials. Textbook content usually lags behind the real language use in workplace settings. Teachers are advised to develop school-based supplementary teaching materials, including desensitized service dialogue recordings from international hotel chains, real communication records between buyers and sellers on cross-border e-commerce platforms, as well as doctor-patient dialogue scripts for nursing majors. With the help of authentic teaching materials, the participants are motivated to learn English to pass tests or get better jobs while they have positive attitudes toward English culture and cultural products^[5].

5.2 Innovating Teaching Methods from Teacher Lecturing to Task-driven Instruction

In accordance with higher vocational students' strength in practical ability and weakness in abstract thinking, communicative language teaching advocates learning communication in interactive communicative contexts and promotes the transformation from teacher-centered to student-centered classroom teaching.

Information gap tasks are widely adopted as classic activities in communicative language teaching. The design rationale lies in that students have to engage in real language interaction to obtain information required for task completion. Role-playing set in workplace scenarios is an effective method to cultivate students' communicative competence, and the authenticity of scenario design is the key. This important factor in the learning process has the potential to influence students' learning achievements^[6].

Group rotation and cooperative learning are implemented to cope with large class size and disparate student proficiency levels. The class can be divided into six to eight fixed groups with four to five members per group, and classroom communicative activities are carried out on a group basis. Teachers can design expert group activities where each group takes charge of a subtask such as product introduction, price

negotiation, logistics arrangement and after-sales service. Students are then rearranged into new groups with experts from different original teams, who share professional knowledge with group members to accomplish comprehensive tasks collectively. This arrangement guarantees full participation of every student and realizes peer assistance between high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners.

5.3 Reforming Evaluation Modes from Paper-and-pencil Tests to Performance-based Assessment

The effectiveness of communicative language teaching will be compromised if classroom teaching adopts communicative approaches while final assessment still relies on traditional multiple-choice questions focusing on grammar and vocabulary. Considering higher vocational students' fear of making mistakes and lack of self-confidence, evaluation reform can be implemented in the following aspects. The proportion of performance-based assessment should be increased. This assessment method requires students to complete practical tasks in simulated or real communicative scenarios to demonstrate their actual communicative competence. The final assessment can be designed as group recording of an 8-to-10-minute English dialogue simulating workplace scenarios with two to three plot twists, covering inquiry, order placement and complaint handling. The scoring criteria focus on task completion, accuracy of information transmission, interactive competence including misunderstanding clarification and response to interlocutors, as well as the application of communicative strategies. Grammatical accuracy is regarded as a secondary evaluation indicator rather than the sole determinant of academic performance.

Diversified evaluation subjects should be established to incorporate peer assessment and self-assessment alongside teacher evaluation. Structured checklists are applied in peer assessment to evaluate students' flexibility in expression when facing communication barriers and willingness to offer others opportunities for full expression. Self-assessment requires students to complete task reflection journals to record difficulties encountered in communication, adopted coping strategies and directions for future improvement. Diversified evaluation improves assessment comprehensiveness and fosters students' metacognitive ability and autonomous learning awareness.

Portfolio assessment is implemented to establish individual English communicative competence growth portfolios for all students. Portfolios collect representative learning outcomes at different learning stages, including self-introduction recordings in the initial stage, role-playing videos in the mid-term semester and comprehensive task presentations at the end of the semester. Students are required to compare their learning progress and write reflection reports at the end of the semester.

6 Conclusion

Communicative language testing (CLT) is relatively the most scientific approach in language testing till now. Yet still, there are some problems about this approach, for

example, the most prominent one is the negative effect of test impact. Also, the effectiveness and suitability of the assessment criterion and proposition of CLT are still to be resolved. Language users and linguists in China should broaden their eyesight, devote themselves into the reformation of language testing, try to find a more suitable mode of communicative language testing in China, thus to enhance the comprehensive language learning ability of Chinese students in higher vocational colleges.

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