

# Developing an English Teaching Program by Integrating the Communicative Approach with Traditional Chinese Methods

Jun-Hong LU

Foreign Language Dept., Xi'an University of Technology, Xi'an 710048, China

lujunhong2000@163.com

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Teaching Methods, Communicative Approach, English Teaching.

**Abstract.** How to integrate traditional teaching methods with communicative approach into English teaching in China has become a hot researching subject in recent years. This paper introduces the traditional Chinese teaching methods and analyses the problems in foreign language teaching and learning in China. It also puts forward the author's view on the issue, and some strategies are finally provided for EFL teaching and learning in China.

## Introduction

With China's association with the outside world increasing and the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative, teachers of English in China have come to realize the importance of the communicative ability of the students. Many teachers begin to try teaching English by communicative teaching method, but soon they find that it is not quite suitable for Chinese students, especially for the non-English majors. This may be due to the fact that English is taught as a foreign language in China, and there is not a real-life environment outside the class for the students to communicate in English with each other. Even in class, the real communication in English is difficult, for both the teacher and the students are Chinese. It is also almost impossible for the students to communicate only by limited input in the classroom. If they are forced to communicate without sufficient input, this may lead to many mistakes and misusing of language in their talks. If we look back to history, a few experts of the older generation who have a good mastery of English largely attribute their success to the traditional Chinese way of teaching. Some of them are even self-taught, like Prof. Ge Chuangui. This makes us once again interested in the traditional Chinese teaching method, and to reexamine its merits to draw inspiration from it.

## Input and its Importance

"Input reinforcement hypothesis" was raised by Krashen, an American linguist, who believes that language learning is an internal process. In order to speed up this process, the key is to reinforce input. The reason why learners who are in the native language speaking country learn much faster than in a foreign country is that they expose a great deal to the target language. If learners in a foreign country are short of the real-life situation to expose to the language, reading and listening extensively are practical and effective ways to increase the input. Krashen also raised the concept "comprehensible input", which means the language or material for input should be taken in comprehensively by the learners. With the sufficient input of the target language, learners will naturally grasp the language.

## Chinese Traditional Teaching Method

China has a long history of Chinese teaching. The characteristic of traditional method of teaching Chinese can be summarized as "reading and memorizing". The essence of the method is focused on input. Reading is an important way of input, and memorizing is also input which involves one's more attention. Many Chinese sayings suggest this idea, like "reading ten thousand books, you will write with miraculous skill". Another traditional way of Chinese learning is reciting, which is viewed as an effective way to reinforce memorization. Reciting has been put at an important place from past to now in teaching and learning.

Teaching English is also a kind of language teaching, which follows the same pattern as teaching Chinese. Influenced by the traditional Chinese teaching, the foreign language teaching also attaches much importance to input. During the learning process, memorizing is fundamental, especially at the early stage. Almost every language feature needs to be learned by heart, such as words, phrases, pronunciation, sentence structure, usage, idioms, etc. Only by vast amount of memorization can learners find the rules of the language and learn faster and faster to reach the stage of using the language freely.

### **Problems in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in China**

Probably the most common mode of teaching in China is the professor's lecturing to a group of students who are lined up side by side in a classroom. The teacher is required to play as the manager, guide and promoter of class while the students are required to play the role as the practisers of learning.

In ancient China, teachers were expected to "pass on the truth, impart knowledge and resolve doubts" (Han Yu). But nowadays, more is expected and demanded to teachers than before. Good teachers, just like good parents, should realize their students are with them for very short time, so what they have to do is to equip them with the means to cope with problems when they are no longer around.

Over the years, English teaching in China has neglected largely the input of language. Many students spend a great deal of time and energy doing the multiple-choice questions. This kind of exercises and tests misguide the students to a wrong direction. Their studies concentrate too much on grammar and word discrimination. Grammar is not treated as a means to help comprehend the text and word discrimination doesn't reach the level to employ them. Since students have little accumulation of language features, they have to think in Chinese, and make sentences by grammatical forms. As a result, many "Chinese English" expressions appear in their talks and writings and the process of translation in their minds lowers the speed of the expression of the language.

Many English teachers in China have also found that most Chinese students have introvert personalities. When the teacher organize some communicative activities or give them a topic to discuss, few students are active to join in, while most students keep silent. One explanation of this may be that Chinese students come from an ethnically homogeneous, group-oriented society that stresses personal modesty (Rao,1996), the other may be that the students lack self-confidence, who are not sure of their language ability, and are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed by other students, thus "lose their face".

### **Integrating the Communicative Approach with Traditional Chinese Methods**

Communicative approach was put forward in 1970s. Sociolinguist, D. H. Hymes, first proposed the concept of communicative competence. It is the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language to form grammatical correct sentences but also to know when, where and to whom to use the sentences. Knowledge of grammar may not be sufficient for effective communication. The most obvious characteristic of communicative approach is that almost everything is done with a communicative intent. Students use the language a great deal through communicative activities such as language games, role plays and problem-solving tasks, etc. With communication as a major teaching aim, the communicative approach is a strong and effective method in language teaching.

Looking back to the FLT history, there are many teaching theories, methods and approaches. All of them did much contribution to the development of FLT and played very important role in their own times. However, nobody can say there is one best method that suit all situations. The overall situation is probably still as Roberts(1982) described: "the communicative approach, which we will now use the term to refer to the British tradition, is in many ways a commitment to eclecticism in practice and cannot be otherwise." Each method will always gradually show its advantages and disadvantages when applied to teaching practice, so researchers have abandoned the thought of looking for a single

best approach that is suitable to any circumstances, and realized that method should adjust according to different situation. So teachers should not be looking for one best method for language teaching to help students learn languages, but rather the most appropriate approach, the design of materials, set of procedures in a particular case.

We can see from our teaching and studying experiences that learning strategies are directly or indirectly related to achievements on foreign language learning. Many students have no idea of how to process information given by a teacher and they are not clear which linguistic aspects should be paid attention to. The learning strategy of some students is not reasonable. It is inevitable to lead them to study English blindly.

In discussing what the most appropriate teaching methods are for Chinese students, the Chinese traditional teaching method, which seems quite out of date to most Westerners, cannot simply be dismissed as “primitive”, “old-fashioned”, or “misguided” for a number of obvious historical and psychological reasons. Therefore, in teaching English to Chinese students, appropriate grammar analysis is essential, especially for beginners. Limited utilization of translation from or to the target language is an indispensable part of teaching. Vocabulary work and pattern drills are also ways of familiarizing the student with sentence structures. This information helps learners acquire linguistic competence. In teaching grammar, it is important to make the language situations and language materials as realistic as possible. Immediately after supplying students with adequate explanations of grammar functions, the teacher can provide students with suitable situations that encourage students to ultimately use the rules in real-life communication.

### **Suggested Teaching and Learning Strategies**

From above we can see that traditional language teaching in China devotes more attention to firm and accurate memorization. There are much in the method that we can make use of. Some of the teaching and learning strategies are suggested here:

#### *1. Reading dictionary*

Reading dictionary is a rapid and effective way to enlarge one’s vocabulary. There are many usages, pronunciations, synonyms and antonyms, etc, in a dictionary. Many experts of the older generation, such as Qian Zhoushu, Ge Chuangui, and Feng Zikai, benefited a lot from this method.

Of course, students should not be expected to grasp the use of words immediately by reading dictionary, but bit by bit to grasp them with large amount of reading and listening simultaneously.

#### *2. Reading and listening extensively*

Comparing with learning and memorizing vocabulary directly, reading and listening are regarded as natural ways to take in information. Since reading materials involves a large number of vocabularies, it can help learners to review the words which are taken in by the unnatural way as reading dictionary. On the one hand, reading is the basis of listening, speaking and writing; on the other hand, it is the purpose of learning.

#### *3. Imitating*

By imitating the foreigner’s pronunciation, intonation, one can improve his ability for oral interaction rapidly. Imitating is also of necessity for students to learn to write.

Some students don’t like imitating others. They like creating something new in order to be different. They even think of imitating as plagiarism, and deliberately avoid some expressions of the original text, so that many of the “Chinese English” expressions appear in their speaking and writing.

#### *4. Setting situations to talk to yourself*

This means that the learner can take certain imaginary situations to practice the language by himself. Here the learner has enough time to think to choose the way he expresses and revise his expressions. He can take up a supposed setting or a topic and ask himself questions. He may fully think of all the aspects of the supposed setting. Once he meets the same kind of topic in the real-life situation he may recall the expressions he had thought before and deal with it.

#### *5. Translate the Chinese translated text back into English*

For example, the magazine *English World* has many articles with both English and Chinese. By comparing your translation with the original you can have a deep impression of the usage of the language. This is a kind of very valuable practice.

## Conclusion

The above methods may be regarded by some people as “out of fashion”. Actually, many people have benefited a lot from them and they have been proved effective. Since teaching and learning a foreign language is a complicated process, no method can guarantee to succeed. In this essay, the idea of drawing lessons from the traditional method doesn’t mean that we should stick to the tradition and not try other new methods. Chinese teachers may adopt some effective Chinese methods to teach Chinese students. No matter whether traditional teaching methods or communicative approach, neither of them can solely fulfill the task of cultivating students’ communicative competence. Any method exclusively used in English teaching would lead to failure. Combination of traditional and modern teaching methods in EFL classroom is the best way.

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