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I. Introduction

Ever since the 1970s, communicative language teaching (CLT) has gained momentum and now "is well established as the dominant theoretical model in ELT [English language teaching]" (Thompson, 1996: 9). The popularity of CLT can be explained in part by the perception of the main function of language, which is, as Richards and Rodgers (2001: 161) point out, "interaction and communication". Communication and the role of language in it are thus given greater prominence in language teaching.

CLT was also introduced to remedy the deficiencies found in previous rule- or structure-based methods, such as grammar-translation method, audiolingual method, the direct method, etc. (Bax, 2003), which were discredited for "their inability to prepare learners for the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning" (Savignon, 2013: 138). CLT, in contrast, is given credit because its key concept of communicative competence "revolutionized language teaching by redefining its goals and the methods to achieve them" (Littlewood, 2011: 545).

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Originating in Europe and the United States, CLT, as "a more functional and practical approach to language education", is now gaining worldwide recognition from educators (Duff, 2014: 20). However, its application in some Asian countries (see Littlewood, 2007) has met with problems, especially in face of the fact that traditional grammar-based approaches still have a strong hold and there are practical constraints in specific teaching contexts.

This study explores the possibility of applying CLT in a Chinese context for a specific course, i.e. the Intensive Reading Course (IRC), which is viewed to have the most constraints and is thus the hardest to initiate changes. The paper first reviews CLT theoretically. It then outlines IRC and raises some issues of applying CLT in the course. Last, the paper discusses what innovations towards a more communicative approach can be introduced to the course, in an attempt to push for deeper reforms in such areas as the teaching syllabus and assessment.

II. A Theoretical Review of CLT

a) Theoretical underpinnings

i. Social and linguistic underpinnings

Starting in the 1970s, the CLT movement was attributed to a number of factors, mainly social needs in Europe and the United States, and developments in some academic disciplines, such as linguistics and psychology (Duff, 2014).

Socially, "a very pragmatic and learner-centered approach" was required to respond to the needs of migrants to learn languages for practical purposes, such as job seeking and interaction with others, etc. (Duff, 2014: 18). Savignon (2013) documents the concurrent developments of CLT in both Europe and the United States, picturing social and linguistic contexts.

Meanwhile, linguistics exhibited some social and functional orientations. Particularly, the work of two linguists, Halliday and Hyme, "was seminal in laying the conceptual basis of CLT" (Littlewood, 2011: 543). Halliday (1973, 1978) researched sociosemantic domains of language, who holds that linguistic goals are socially oriented (Canale & Swain: 1980: 19). Hymes' (1972) "communicative competence", proposed in opposition to Chomsky's pure linguistic competence,

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consists of four types of knowledge and abilities, namely, grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural and probabilistic systems of competence (Canale & Swain: 1980: 16). Hymes' concept "may be seen as the equivalent of Halliday's meaning potential" (Savignon, 2013: 135). Communicative competence later became the central concept and goal of CLT (Richards, 2006). Canale and Swain (1980) found that their theories failed to be integrative, with discourse-level connection of individual utterances neglected and components of communicative competence unintegrated.

ii. *Models of communicative competence*

a. *Canale and Swain model*

Discovering limitations of many so-called integrative theories, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed their own framework of communicative competence, which is made up of three key components: first, *grammatical competence*, which includes lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic and phonological knowledge; second, *sociolinguistic competence,* which encompasses sociocultural rules and rules of discourse, the former dictating the contextually appropriate ways of producing and understanding utterances and the latter being understood in terms of the cohesion and coherence of utterances; third, *strategic competence*, which consists principally of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies, at play when there are breakdowns in communication. Canale (1983) later added *discourse competence* to the framework, accenting texts at the discourse level (Duff, 2014: 19).

All four components reflect "interrelated aspects" of speakers' ability to put language to effective use for communicative purposes and the endeavour to "operationalize communicative competence" for instructional purposes (Duff, 2014: 19). Littlewood (2011: 546) believes that Canale and Swain model is still "[A]n important orientational framework in discussions of the nature of communicative competence in a second language".

b. *Other models of communicative competence*

Other models of communicative competence are more or less based on or influenced by Canale and Swain model, re-labeling the terminology, regrouping the components, or adding some more. Littlewood (2011) slightly adapts their terminology and adds one more dimension, in whose version there are *linguistic, discourse, pragmatic, sociolinguistic* and *sociocultural competence*. Saville and Hargreaves (1999) also draw on Canale and Swain model, describing the spoken language ability in terms of *language competence* and *strategic competence*. Bachman (1990) regroups the basic elements into three types: *language competence, strategic competence* and *psychophysiological mechanisms*, covering psycholinguistic aspects untouched by Canale and Swain model (Littlewood, 2011). New types are continuously being added, such as *intercultural communicative competence* (Alptekin, 2002), *metaphoric competence* (Littlemore & Low, 2006), *interactional competence* (Young, 2008).

b) Principles and key features

The aforementioned models of communicative competence can be used as frameworks for teachers to conduct CLT classes. CLT "is best considered an approach rather than a method", in which a number of principles are formulated to guide classroom procedures (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 172):

- Learners learn a language through using it to communicate
- Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities.
- Fluency is an important dimension of communication.
- Communication involves the integration of different language skills.
- Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.

(Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 172)

Those principles stress communication and the learner. Communication is not only the goal of class activities, but also the means by which to learn a language, whose key elements are the integration of language skills and fluency. The principles also approach pedagogy from a learner's perspective to "reflect a communicative view of language and language learning" (ibid.).

Lately, informed by psycholinguistic research findings, Dörnyei (2009: 41-42) works out seven principles of what he terms "the principled communicative approach (PCA)" to reflect "the state of the art of our research knowledge of instructed second language acquisition". The essence of this approach, as Dörnyei (2009: 42) puts it, is "the creative integration of meaningful communication with relevant declarative input and the automatisation of both linguistic rules and lexical items".

Two versions of CLT are developed, originating from different language teaching and learning traditions. A strong version, in the American tradition, resorts more to experiential strategies, i.e. to learn through communication, whereas a weak version, in the European tradition, employs function- and grammar-based analytic strategies along with experiential strategies (Littlewood, 2011). Simply speaking, a weak version drives at "learning to use" English while a strong one at "using English to learn it" (Howatt, 1984: 279, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 155). A typical strong version is task-based language teaching (TBL) (see Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004, Long, 2015) and a weak version is Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model (see Skehan, 1996, Harmer, 2007), which has increasingly been discredited (Richards, 2006).

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c) *Problems and issues*

In light of its well-recognised benefits and the positive results reported in some earlier research projects (Savignon, 2013), CLT is widely accepted in the language teaching profession and remains popular today. However, there are still some issues about CLT, such as its indefinability, conflict with form-focused instruction and context-free prescriptions, with the Chinese context brought to the fore.

i. *Issue of indefinability*

One problem with CLT is its identity issue, i.e. there is not a uniform definition of CLT, which can refer to "an increasingly diverse array of practices, principles, and contexts" (Duff, 2014: 20). Harmer (2003: 289) agrees that it means "a multitude of different things to different people". Richards and Rodgers (2001: 155) therefore conclude that "[T]here is no single text or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative". This ambiguity gives rise to the situations in which different people focus on different characteristics of CLT and there is a discrepancy between the principles accepted by teachers and their actual classroom practice (Sakui, 2004; Beaumont & Chang, 2011).

ii. *Conflict with form-focused instruction*

It seems that there is a clear divide between CLT and the traditional form-focused instruction, as is evidenced by communicative competence underlying CLT. In the early years of CLT, the avoidance of form-focused instruction was almost a consensus among proponents of CLT. However, the avoidance of explicit grammar teaching is seen by Thompson (1996: 10) as "the most persistent–and most damaging–misconception". Dörnyei (2009: 41) in his PCA advocates finding the "*optimal balance* between meaning-based and form-focused activities". Littlewood (2011) tries to integrate the two, giving equal weight to language experiences and language analysis.

iii. *Context-free application*

Another problem with CLT is that it does not give due attention to the teaching context. Duff (2014: 28) questions its omnipotence, arguing that "[C]learly CLT cannot offer a common template or prescription for all L2 teaching and learning contexts, all the different ages and stages of learners, or all the different purposes for learning". Similarly, Bax (2003: 278) criticises the "CLT attitude" adopted by many language teachers, warning that "the consequences of this are serious, to the extent that we need to demote CLT as our main paradigm…". Aware of this danger, some scholars have researched CLT in specific contexts, such as in China (Hu, 2002, 2005), Japan (Sakui, 2004), South Korea (Beaumont & Chang, 2011) or East Asia as a whole (Littlewood, 2007). Those studies further attest to the view that CLT means "a multitude of different things to different people" (Harmer, 2003: 289).

iv. *Application in China and other constraints*

In a context-specific approach, Beaumont and Chang (2011: 294) list some practical constraints on implementing CLT shared in Asian classrooms, such as big class size, unsuitable materials, grammar-focused exams, limited time, inadequate training and teacher's lack of confidence in language skills. Studying the Chinese context, Hu (2002: 93) acknowledges that CLT was introduced in an effort to reform its ELT but it "has failed to make the expected impact on ELT in the PRC [China]". He approaches this issue from a sociocultural perspective and probes into one constraint, i.e. the Chinese culture of learning (ibid.). Other constraints relevant to the implementation of CLT in China include teacher education, the huge gap between different regions in the quality of English teaching, etc. (Hu, 2005).

III. Basic Information of Intensive Reading Course (IRC)

In the Chinese context of ELT, IRC is one of the core courses for English majors at the foundation stage, which has the tightest constraints and is hence one of the toughest areas to implement CLT.

a) *An overview of IRC*

IRC is offered under *The National Curricula for English Majors in Higher Education Institutions* (2000) (hereafter *The Curricula*). *The Curricula* (2000: 1) serves "as the guidelines for English majors in the higher education institutions of various kinds in the country".

The 4-year undergraduate program for English majors is divided into the foundation stage (1st - 2nd year) and the advanced stage (3rd - 4th year). The foundation stage aims to lay a solid foundation for the advanced stage by teaching the basics of English, training the basic language skills, improving students' language competence, etc. (*The Curricula,* 2000: 2). As to teaching methodology, *The Curricula* clearly stipulates that teachers should encourage students' active participation in "various communicative activities" to cultivate "the basic communicative skills" and fulfill the objectives specified for basic language skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation) (*The Curricula,* 2000: 23).

IRC, also called Close Reading Course, Essential English or Basic English in different institutions, is defined as "an integrated language skill training course" offered at the foundation stage, with the teaching aim being "to cultivate and improve students' ability of an integrated use of English skills" (*The Curricula,* 2000: 23). Its objectives touch upon vocabulary, sentence patterns, genres, reading comprehension, etc., as prescribed in *The Curricula* (2000: 23). The course description quite evidently shows that vocabulary and grammar are still stressed in IRC,

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along with reading comprehension ability and an awareness of genres.

b) Issues of applying CLT in IRC

i. *Course syllabus*

Under *The Curricula*, each institution might have its own course syllabus for IRC, but follows a similar format, with such key elements as basic information (e.g. course type, code, etc.), course nature and task (e.g. aims and requirements, focal and difficult points, etc.), and teaching content, in which text titles are listed with key words and grammar focuses in each text.

This type of syllabus bears features of a Type A syllabus categorised by White (1988: 44), which is not appropriate for CLT. First, it is still determined by authority, with teachers as decision-makers and objectives set in advance. Further, it focuses on what is to be learnt rather than how. It gives priority to "*analytic* L2 knowledge" about language parts, rules and organization, which is not ready in use in spontaneous communication or "unplanned discourse", where "there is no time or opportunity to prepare what will be said" (White, 1988: 46).

ii. *Coursebooks*

Guided by *The Curricula*, the IRC coursebooks adhere to similar writing principles and even formats. They either simply number the texts or group them under specific themes, all spelling out the vocabulary and grammar to be mastered in each text or unit. Furthermore, those texts, mostly classic or literary texts and often abridged or adapted to cater to students' level of proficiency, are not "authentic (nonpedagogic) texts" linked to the real-world communication (Littlewood, 2011: 549).

iii. *National exam*

When students finish the foundation stage (2nd year), they will be assessed by a standard national test, Test for English Majors - Grade 4 (TEM4). The test is set under *The Syllabus for TEM4* (2004) (hereafter *The ST4*) and aims to give students an overall assessment on the language skills specified in *The Curricula,* an integrated use of those basic skills and their mastery of grammar and vocabulary (*The ST4*: 2004: 2).

The test takes the form of a 130-minute written test, consisting of 6 question types, such as cloze, grammar and vocabulary, reading comprehension, etc. (*The ST4*: 2004: 3). Strangely, when *The ST4* (2004: 2) stipulates the scope of the test, it leaves out the speaking skill, which is clearly set as a teaching objective in *The Curricula*. That being the case, how to assess an integrated use of all the skills? In Savignon's (2013: 137) words, "learner performance on tests of discrete morphosyntactic features was not a good predictor of their performance on a series of integrative communicative tasks".

This high-stakes test has a "negative washback" effect (Duff, 2014: 25). On the one hand, teachers have to cater to students' need to sit the written test, which still rewards lexical and grammatical knowledge. On the other hand, since the test is "a standard informative test to assess teaching quality" (*The ST4*: 2004: 2), teachers have to compromise the principles of CLT to return to the traditional study of grammar, vocabulary and texts.

iv. *Traditional IRC teaching procedure*

Since IRC has been a core course ever since the 1990s, it has some distinct characteristics of traditional English teaching in China. Typically, teachers of IRC follow a 6-step teaching procedure

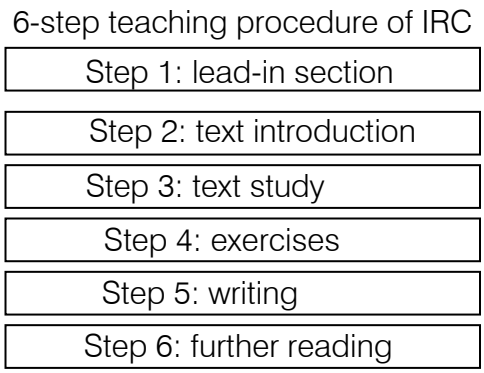


Figure 1: 6-step IRC teaching procedure

In step 1, *lead-in section,* there are pre-reading discussions or activities. In step 2, *text introduction*, teachers introduce the author, background information and the synopsis. Step 3, *text study*, is a detailed study of important language points, e.g. words' meanings and usage, grammar structures. At the text level, teachers explain the main and supporting ideas, implications and cultural information to help students with their text comprehension. In step 4, *exercises,* teachers check the textbook exercises, followed by a dictation or quiz. In step 5, *writing,* the written work is often a short essay of about 200 words on a text-related topic or theme. In step 6, further reading materials are supplied to help students deepen their understanding of the text or related themes.

This procedure shows that there really is not much space for communicative activities or even speaking opportunities for students. It is characteristic of a teacher-fronted instruction, often found in grammar-translation method, though a communicative approach is clearly directed in *The Curricula*.

IV. Innovation of IRC in a CLT Framework

Hu (2004: 43) has noticed that despite the "intensive top-down promotion of CLT" nationwide, many Chinese ELT classroom practices have not experienced fundamental changes. In view of the

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aforementioned constraints and issues, it is quite hard to implement CLT fully in IRC, especially in such a top-down manner. However, it is possible that innovations in a CLT framework can be fostered in certain respects, such as reading materials, learner-centredness, teaching procedure and teacher training, in an effort to push for greater changes in the course, e.g. course syllabus and test format.

a) Reading materials

Using authentic texts is one of the key principles of CLT (Duff, 2014). The word "authentic", literally meaning "genuine", as opposed to "contrived", "bookish", or "artificial", designates naturally-produced written or spoken language and also the communication in which such language is used (Duff, 2014: 22). Richards (2006: 20) lists four major benefits of authentic sources, i.e. they provide cultural information, exposure, a closer link to learners' needs and a more creative approach to teaching.

As supplementary materials to the contrived texts in IRC coursebooks, it is desirable that authentic texts are provided wherever possible in the teaching procedure, in line with the view that "[T]he purpose of reading should be the same in class as they are in real life" (Richards, 2006: 20). The suggested authentic materials for IRC are magazine or newspaper articles, unabridged literary works, etc. as long as they "represent contemporary … written language produced or used by native speakers for purposes other than language teaching" (Duff, 2014: 22-23).

Those authentic texts can be used to cultivate communicative competence, in this case, sociolinguistic competence in terms of the rules of discourse, which are understood from the perspectives of "cohesion (i.e. grammatical links) and coherence (i.e. appropriate combination of communicative functions)" (Canale & Swain, 1980: 30). Teachers can analyse and teach conventions of global text structure above sentence level.

At the same time, grammatical competence should not be neglected, which embraces "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology" (Canale & Swain, 1980: 29). They can be integrated into the study of the reading materials, as Canale and Swain (1980: 30) insist that it be "an important concern for any communicative approach whose goals include providing learners with the knowledge of how to determine and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances".

b) Learner-centredness

Learner-centredness is an essential quality of CLT classroom. The transition from a teacher-centred instruction to a student-centred CLT is described as "a quantum leap" (Chow & Mok-Cheung, 2004: 158, cited in Littlewood, 2011: 551). Learner-centred approaches are those that "take into account learners' backgrounds, language needs and goals, and generally allow learners some creativity and role in instructional decisions" (Wesche & Skehan, 2002: 208, cited in Littlewood, 2011: 549).

Learner-centredness can be realised through students' greater involvement in the learning process. CLT requires students to "take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning" (Richards, 2006: 5). Accordingly, in IRC, students can be entrusted with some of the tasks originally assumed by the teacher. For instance, the *text introduction* section (step 2) can be alternatively done by students after adequate preparation. Additionally, greater involvement is achieved through "a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning" (Richards, 2006: 5). Some of the IRC procedures, such as *exercises* (step 4), *writing* (step 5) and *further reading* (step 6), which depend largely on individual work, can become "cooperative learning" in the form of pair or group work (Littlewood, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

IRC can be made more learner-centred by relating class content to the outside world and students' own lives, interests and perspectives (Duff, 2014), in other words, to ensure social relevance (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Duff (2014: 24) once observed a CLT class of English for academic purposes at a Canadian university, in which this principle was applied and good learner feedbacks were reported that "they appreciated being able to discuss real-life problems, learn more about Canadian society and culture, talk about issues that are personally meaningful to them…".

c) Communicative activities

Communicative activities are central to CLT class. By Canale and Swain's (1980: 33) standards, they should be meaningful and have the characteristics of "genuine communication", such as "basis in social interaction, the relative creativity and unpredictability of utterances, its purposefulness and goal-orientation, and its authenticity …". Richards (2006: 16) distinguishes 3 types of practice, namely, mechanical, meaningful and communicative practice, with the last type referring to activities to use language in real communicative situations where "there is information change and unpredictable language use". This type is similar to Littlewood's (1981) communicative activities, which are subdivided into functional communication activities, for information or problem-solving purposes, and social interactional activities, attending to contexts and participants as well as the appropriate use of language (Richards, 2006:18).

Richards (2006) lists the activities typically used in CLT classrooms. When applied in IRC classroom, they can be adapted and geared to genres, as exemplified in the following: firstly, for *narrative texts*, information-gap activities or role plays; secondly, for

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expository texts, task-completion activities (e.g. puzzles, map-reading, games), information-transfer activities (e.g. from written descriptions to graphs) or reasoning-gap activities (e.g. inference, practical reasoning); thirdly, for *argumentation*, opinion-sharing activities (e.g. a ranking task) or information-gathering activities (e.g. surveys, searches and interviews). Preferably, communicative activities are as varied as possible, subject to different texts, contents or topics.

Those communicative activities have great advantages. Firstly, they encourage cooperative learning in "a variety of social participation formats" (Duff, 2014: 24), with such benefits as a great amount of language produced, higher motivational level, more chance for fluency development, exposure to other language learners' input (Richards, 2006: 20). Secondly, they are able to "facilitate negotiated interaction" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), in which information is exchanged, problem solved, appropriateness of language use stressed (Littlewood, 2011) and creativity promoted (Harmer, 2003). Further, students need to negotiate meanings with others to develop communicative abilities (Duff, 2014). In brief, those activities conform to Richards' (2006: 13) principle of "[make] real communication the focus of language learning".

d) Teacher training

Teachers play a key role in initiating changes in the classroom. Teacher training is therefore of primary importance, which covers such aspects as a correct understanding of CLT, a change of teachers' roles and the improvement of their language proficiency.

Firstly, teachers should thoroughly understand the CLT framework, including its characteristics, benefits and limitations (Harmer, 2003). This task becomes even more urgent in light of the fact that CLT is often misunderstood or misinterpreted, largely due to its identity issue. In an early study of CLT classroom, Spada (1987) reported a mismatch between teachers' self-claims of CLT teaching processes and actual practices which were similar to traditional approaches (Duff, 2014: 25). Similarly, imparities are found in Sakui's (2004: 162) study of language teaching in Japan between "the teachers' definition of CLT and the situated understanding of CLT".

Secondly, teachers should be educated in the change of roles. Traditionally, they are simply viewed as knowledge-transmitters or "a model for correct speech and writing", who also have the responsibility of making students' production accurate (Richards, 2006: 5). Yet, in a CLT classroom, a teacher is supposed to be "a multi-role educator" (Littlewood, 2011: 551), a facilitator in language learning (Richards, 2006: 5), "an instigator of and participant in meaningful communication" (Canale & Swain: 1980: 33). Overall, a teacher's principal role is "to create a nurturing, collaborative learning community and worthwhile activities for students" (Duff, 2014: 20).

Thirdly, the improvement of teachers' language proficiency is clearly marked as one of the expected changes from teachers in China (Littlewood, 2011). CLT has quite high demands on teachers' language proficiency (Maley, 1986) and that teachers are not always confidently competent in their English often makes them feel reluctant to carry out communicative activities (Beaumont & Chang, 2011). Canale and Swain (1980: 33) also suggest that teacher training should cultivate communicative competence as well as its components, as they put it, "Certainly such teacher training will be crucial to the success of a communicative approach…".

V. Conclusion

CLT is generally believed to be employed for teaching language for communicative purposes. It therefore seems more suitable to be applied in speaking courses. The possibility to apply CLT in other courses has not been explored enough. This study shows that it is even possible to implement CLT in a reading course like IRC with quite tight constraints. Nevertheless, many issues about the implementation of CLT are still hotly debated, such as the relation between form-focus instruction and CLT, or that between controlled practice activities and communicative activities, context-specific adaptation of CLT principles, just to name a few.

As regards an overall view of CLT, Savignon (2013: 138) argues that instead of being another "method" just added to the previous ones, CLT represents "an approach to language teaching" that changes in purpose, emphasis, linguistic and cultural goals of instruction. Littlewood (2011) acknowledges that CLT is constantly evolving. He suggests "a more inclusive account of CLT", trying to integrate experiential and analytical aspects of teaching and learning, non-communicative and genuine communicative activities, oral and written activities (Littlewood, 2011: 549). CLT should not be seen as the panacea for all the problems in language pedagogy. Since the ultimate aim of CLT is to promote better teaching and learning, whatever the label is, be it CLT or not, does not matter much. This perception might keep CLT full of vitality and in constant evolution to accommodate more changes and innovations in the future.

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