

# The Integration of the Communicative Language Teaching and the Conventional Approach to Teaching English in Chinese College

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**Abstract:** *With the rapid development of the social economy in the late 2000s, the communicative competence of English learners has increased significantly in China. The conventional approach tends to memorize by rote, which begins to withdraw gradually from Chinese Higher Education. The communicative language teaching (CLT) method is emerging worldwide and getting increasing attention. This paper has used the method of secondary review to analyze the implementation status of teaching methods in College English education in China, which primarily focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of the conventional approach and communicative language teaching. Moreover, this paper analyzes the restrictive factors that the CLT method can not completely replace the conventional approach through comparative analysis.*

**Keywords:** *English language teaching, conventional approach, communicative language teaching*

## 1. Introduction

Tang et al. [1] argue that the earlier teaching methods used in English Teaching in China were teacher-centered grammar-translation (GT) and audio-lingual methods. Many researchers believe both methods trade language as a skill or habit acquired through repetition and imitation. Learners are passive recipients rather than active participants under the conventional approach, and their learning process might lack information exchange. Communicative English language teaching (CLT) was introduced into the English classroom of the Chinese higher education system in the early 1980s, which improves communicative competence and learning ability through interactive learning and cooperative learning. Its purpose is to obtain practical English communicative competence [2,3].

While strengthening the cultivation of students' language ability, College English teaching focuses on cultivating students' communicative ability [4,5]. A focus of English teaching reform is to make the teaching model conform to the development of the trend of the times. Relevant practitioners in China's education industry have realized the importance of English communicative competence. However, some constraints in Chinese English teachers' transformation in English teaching, from the conventional approach like GT to the communicative approach, hinder students from participating in communicative activities in the teaching process.

This paper introduces the conventional approach and communicative language teaching in China College English Education and shares its advantages and disadvantages. Further comparative analysis of the respective focus and the constraints in the practice of College English Education in China.

## 2. Conventional approach

Generally, the teacher-centered conventional approach, accompanied by students passively and mechanically learning English, is an effective method to improve learners' English performance in China [6,7]. Consistently, the conventional knowledge-centered teaching approach tends to take sentence patterns as the basis of teaching materials in obtaining factual information. It aims to instill knowledge into learners' brains with high efficiency. For example, Tang et al. [1] argue that the earlier teaching methods used in English Teaching in China were teacher-centered grammar-translation (GT) and audio-lingual methods. Grammar translation methods mainly carry out grammar teaching through translation and interpretation. This method focuses on rote memorization to improve learners' cognitive dimension

effectively in a certain period.

Many researchers have believed that the audio-lingual method trades language as a skill or habit acquired through repetition and imitation. Learners are passive recipients rather than active participants under audio-lingual methods, and their learning process might lack information exchange. After years of English learning in the conventional approach, learners' grammatical structure has become relatively strong. Learners learn English grammatical structures and rules by rote and cannot flexibly apply them to a real-world situation. Homogeneously, they have acquired specific language skills but can not apply them to practice [1,5].

Notably, low efficiency and exam-oriented have become frequent labels in College English teaching [7]. However, as China strives to expand its global market and influence, applying a communicative approach by Chinese College English learners has become necessary [2,8]. Regarding the national policy, future education can cultivate students' cognitive ability and pay attention to heuristic, inquiry, participatory and cooperative teaching (Ministry of Education, 2021). The conventional approach contradicts the future goal of English Teaching in Higher Education in China. Therefore, it is destined to be replaced by new methods.

### **3. Communicative language teaching method**

The Communicative language teaching approach has gradually become the most popular teaching method in Chinese schools since it was introduced into China in the early 1980s. Qi [9] proposed that in China, the communicative language teaching method in foreign language teaching originates from the dissatisfaction with the conventional approach of grammar-translation and the audio-lingual translation methods. The teaching activities under the guidance of CLT principles are learner-centered, usually carried out by students in groups, requiring students to carry out extensive practical activities. Teachers are not the leaders in the classroom, and they are the instructors of classroom procedures and activities [4].

The communicative approach emphasizes real and authentic materials to meet the learners' actual communicative needs in English language learning. For example, teaching activities such as role-playing and jigsaw reading require learners to work together to complete learning tasks. Meanwhile, CLT considers the cultivation of students' Comprehensive English skills and their abilities to use these skills in real-world situations. For instance, Li [8] believes that the communicative competence of Chinese college students still lags far behind their language competence, although many Chinese scholars and College English teachers have realized the importance of integrating communicative competence into English classrooms. Similarly, students' passive learning may be related to teachers' inability to fully cultivate students' communicational skills and improve their English interpersonal and expression skills [1].

Different constraints have emerged in communicative teaching, which gradually replaces the conventional approach. Starting from the communicative teaching method, the teaching materials specially designed for it break the integrity of the English language, thus increasing the difficulty of students' learning English. Under the exam-oriented education system, Chinese college students may be confused because they are not used to communicative methods. They may prefer to take intensive reading and grammar lectures and attend regular exams. Similarly, students may negatively treat simulated communicative activities such as group cooperation in class.

The role of teachers in this teaching method is challenging to evaluate. They may try to become the organizer of students' mechanical imitation activities, which may lead to a lack of students' learning flexibility and reading and writing ability. Although some teachers show a positive attitude towards communicative teaching, on the whole, they fail to carry out communicative practice [2].

### **4. Comparative analysis of communicative language teaching method and conventional approach**

According to Shower's research in 2013, the four competencies of the communicative approach include grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence, which compares the CLT and conventional teaching methods from the following perspectives. Comparison analysis results of the communicative language teaching approach and conventional approach are summarized in Table 1. It is found that the conventional approach lacks sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence derived from the

development of the times. Similarly, most Chinese College English teachers may lack the experience of being taught in the communicative language teaching method. They may not understand the CLT method or use the incoherent and incomplete CLT method to teach their students [11].

The Communicative language teaching methods introduced into the Chinese college English system at the end of the last century have several differences compared to the conventional approach. The most distinguishing feature that sets the CLT method and conventional approach apart is the learner-centered rather than teacher-centered focus. Notably, the CLT methods develop student skills that can be used in a real-world situation, while the conversational approach focuses solely on the indoctrination of knowledge. Another distinguishing feature is the means of learning. The CLT methods are applied through practical activities, whereas the conventional approaches are accomplished through rote memorization.

According to the grammatical competence, communicative language teaching methods develop learners' language knowledge, for example, vocabulary, word and sentence formation, and spelling. Instead, the conventional approach focuses on developing learners' reading and listening comprehension and grammatical structures. Moreover, the CLT methods can help students develop practical skills. However, the conventional approaches are not involved. Firstly, the CLT methods can help students develop sociolinguistic skills through appropriate spoken and written discourse in various genres. Afterward, the CLT methods can combine the form and meaning of language to manage appropriate and coherent discourse in discourse competence. Lastly, as for strategic competence, the CLT methods can overcome communication problems by developing learning and communication strategies.

*Table 1: Comparison analysis results of communicative language teaching approach and conventional approach*

Comparison Perspective	Communicative Language Teaching	Conventional Approach
Distinguishing feature	Learner-centered; Using skills in a real-world situation; Through practical activities	Teacher-centred; Indoctrination of knowledge; Through rote memorization Reading/listening comprehension (audio-lingual methods);
Grammatical competence	Development of student-language knowledge (vocabulary, word and sentence formation, and spelling)	Grammatical structure (grammar-translation methods)
Sociolinguistic competence	Using appropriate spoken and written discourse in different genres	Not involved
Discourse competence	Combining the form and meaning of language to manage appropriate and coherent discourse	Not involved
Strategic competence	Overcome communication problems by developing learning and communication strategies	Not involved

In Chinese Higher Education, the practical application of the conventional or the CLT method alone has some constraints. For example, communicative language teaching may confuse and negatively affect students. Rao [4] found that, in the current college English education in which CLT is widely popular, students believe CLT does not contribute as much to improving performance as traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, the CLT teaching method may fail to improve communicative and language competence. Arguably, these constraints are not only the problems of the CLT teaching method replacing the traditional teaching method in Chinese higher education but also some problems affecting students' English learning and practical application [9].

Yuan [12] believes that the CLT method is learner-centered and based on experience. Students should be encouraged to study actively and independently to cultivate learners' communicative competence. The traditional teaching method can meet the desire of students to improve their scores under the exam-oriented education system. Although there are some restrictive factors in CLT development in China, it can not deny that CLT has cultivated Chinese college students' communicative competence. However, in China's English teaching environment, the communicative approach itself does not give full play to its function of promoting students' language learning and development [4,9].

From most cases of College English education in China, it is not difficult to find that using the conventional approach is more likely to help students achieve higher scores to meet students' examination needs. For example, it cultivated a strong grammatical structure through grammar-translation methods. Students can be encouraged to discuss and explore various interactive strategies of the CLT teaching method to improve student's English language ability to solve problems. However, whether these two methods can be combined to meet the communicative needs while improving the students' performance.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on Chinese traditional Confucian cultural beliefs, combining the CLT and conventional approach can help learners develop both their language and communicative competence. CLT can shape into a new combined method, which is more suitable for the current situation of Chinese Education under the influence of Chinese traditional English education methods and the exam-orientated education system. It retains the practical communicative competence expected in CLT teaching and considers the part that pays attention to the accuracy of grammar knowledge in traditional teaching methods to help teachers and students better adapt to the new CLT methods. The practice of the CLT method in College English Teaching in China will be worthy of continual investigation under the influence of the 14th five-year plan.

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