Creating a Communicative, Learner-Centred, Intercultural EFL Classroom

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Abstract: This study examines the incorporation of independent learning and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes with the aim of establishing a communicative, learner-focused, and intercultural setting. The text underscores the significance of cultivating student independence, improving teacher-student engagement, and adjusting instructional approaches to accommodate students' proficiency levels and learning preferences. The study emphasizes the mutual reliance between language and culture, the importance of having the ability to communicate effectively across cultures (intercultural communication competence or ICC), and the need to include cultural material in language instruction. This text explores the difficulties and remedies involved in the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in China. It specifically addresses issues such as teacher training, class numbers, and student motivation. The research concludes by recommending customized pedagogical approaches that specifically target unique educational environments, thus fostering efficient language acquisition and intercultural sensitivity.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Autonomous Learning; Intercultural Communication

1. Introduction

Language and culture are deeply interconnected, with different languages producing distinct cultural contexts. Effective communication requires intercultural skills, which complicates the language learning process. [1] To address issues in traditional English language teaching (ELT) [2], teachers should innovate by designing and implementing student-centred activities that combine language and culture teaching, enhance teacher-student interaction, and adapt teaching formats to students' levels and learning styles. This essay reviews the literature on autonomous learning and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) [3], concluding with their application in China's ELT and offering reflections.

2. Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning involves students being intrinsically self-motivated, having clear learning goals, and choosing learning strategies that suit them. [4] They can self-monitor, adjust, and evaluate the learning process and take the initiative to create an environment conducive to learning. [5] Student-centred, teacher-led, and self-development are the three main features of independent learning. The essence lies in increasing students' self-awareness of learning, gradually mastering learning methods, and developing good study habits.

The emergence of the autonomous learning model is closely linked to the development of educational psychology. The three primary schools of contemporary educational psychology—humanistic, cognitivist, and constructivist—all emphasize the importance of student-centred education. [6] Autonomous learning draws on the idea that humanism must emphasize the human emotional factor, stressing that students participate in and even determine the whole teaching process under the teacher's guidance and assistance. [7] It also adopts the cognitive-discovery theory of cognitivism, emphasizing that knowledge is acquired mainly through students' discovery. Furthermore, it draws on social constructivist ideas, emphasizing that the student is the main subject in the teaching and learning process, while the teacher acts as an organizer, guide, helper, and facilitator. [8]

2.1 Importance and Concerns

Foreign language study and teaching require autonomous learning. Learning autonomously is active and productive. Autonomous learning is essential for lifelong learning since self-regulated learners are more academically successful and optimistic. [9] Students with stronger self-regulated learning skills are more likely to succeed, demonstrating that self-learning is important in education. Students with good self-regulation are more academically motivated and effective. Learn autonomous learning through goal-directed engagement. Self-directed learners who reflect on their work and set goals might build individualized learning strategies. [10]

Increasing awareness of independent learning boosts student autonomy. Language teachers have focused on ways to measure and govern pupils' learning skills. Student autonomy does better than other learning approaches. Teachers who want more student autonomy must first

reflect on their own ideas, practices, experiences, and expectations. Teachers retain authority over what is taught. Teachers are essential to fostering student autonomy in the classroom. Teachers must help pupils through difficult learning assignments because they struggle to adjust.

2.2 Strategies

Developing students' autonomous learning skills requires a concerted effort from both students and teachers. Strategies that incorporate student motivation and self-regulation are essential. Both aim to create a student-centred classroom where the teacher guides students through all stages of the learning and teaching process, acting as a guide rather than merely a transmitter of knowledge.

Motivation is the innate drive to achieve learning goals, and motivation and learning goals go hand in hand. A clear goal motivates learning, and intrinsic motivation drives learning goals. Teachers guide students to develop the right motivation and attitude towards learning. [11] Through teacher guidance and correct learning strategies, students gradually form new study habits and develop a sense of independent learning. Reinforcing students' sense of autonomous learning makes them aware that independent learning is the basis for lifelong learning and a critical competency for success. Teachers should make full use of classroom teaching to strengthen the development of learning strategies for students. [12]

3. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a language teaching approach that arose in the 1980s. It tries to promote 'communicative competence' (rather than linguistic competence) through considerable student involvement and 'genuine' meaningful dialogue.

3.1 Major Features of CLT

CLT emphasizes a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, with discourse as the basic unit of instruction and integrated training as the primary form of consolidation. It requires students to use English to complete communicative tasks in daily life, thereby improving their ability to think, interact, and be creative in English. The CLT method is used to enhance students' learning and overall development, focusing on practical language activities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and developing good psychological qualities and the quality of English language use with communicative competence at its core.

3.2 Pedagogical Implications: Challenges and Solutions

CLT is a practical, dynamic, and up-to-date teaching method that plays a pivotal role in developing students' use of language and improving their communicative competence. However, the ELT course remains teacher-centred and test-centred, affecting the effectiveness of CLT implementation. Variations in teacher quality and awareness of CLT, large class sizes, and a focus on examination results present challenges. Solutions include developing student motivation, creating flexible teaching environments, and integrating communicative activities. Teachers should assist students in clarifying learning purposes, creating an enjoyable atmosphere, and promoting successful experiences.

3.3 Intercultural Language Learning

The importance of developing intercultural communication competence (ICC) skills in ELT is undeniable, especially as globalization and multiculturalism become more prominent. ELT aims to develop students' language skills, intercultural awareness, and ICC skills. [13] Language and culture are interdependent and intertwined, with culture permeating all aspects of language. Therefore, to become an ICC-competent person, one needs to learn communicative skills, fully understand other cultural connotations, and integrate oneself into them. [14]

3.4 How to Develop ICC

English is a communication tool, and ELT aims to promote and enhance learners' capacity to utilize it. Students learn a language through linguistic communication, with meaningful communication in real-life situations as the goal of classroom activities. Language teaching should be based on the needs of learners, and teachers should help students identify the best way to learn a language. Motivation is significant for students, and teachers should make classroom activities engaging, exciting, and enjoyable. The combined role of teachers should be highlighted in CLT, acting as managers, organizers, and performance monitors to guide and encourage students.

3.5 Reflections and Applications in China

As an international student from China and a former teacher in China, the author identifies several challenges in the English classroom regarding autonomous learning, communicative learning, and cross-cultural learning. The communicative approach, prevalent in Western countries for almost 30 years, was introduced to China two decades ago. It has become the primary method of teaching English in China today. However, English education in China has been dominated by a written examination format, with students unable to use English effectively to communicate. The focus of the English classroom has shifted from grammar to student-centred learning and communication. [15]

Grammatical competence is not representative of communicative competence. Many Chinese students' poor communicative competence is due to their low willingness to communicate and reluctance to speak up. [16] Teaching intercultural competence needs more attention in the English classroom. Traditional English teaching does not recognize the importance of intercultural communication in the practical use of language. Teachers focus on learning foreign language knowledge and students' passing rates in examinations, but do not consider how to apply the language correctly in practice, leading to a decrease in student motivation.

3.6 Pedagogical Implications in China

The paper discusses various pedagogical approaches proposed by different scholars, noting that the concepts of Autonomous learning, CLT, and ICC were developed in the West and introduced to China. Many of these concepts are not directly applicable to language teaching in China. Therefore, there is a need to design teaching methods more suitable for Chinese classrooms. Teachers need to design teaching classrooms with autonomy and cross-cultural interaction suitable for China.

An effective ELT course could include designing an atlas of landscapes representing different cultures and dividing students into groups to choose their preferred destinations. This design aims to show cultural differences and encourage students to reflect on them. [17] The teacher should play a guiding role throughout the teaching process, providing clear guidance and feedback. Such a mode can enhance students' independent learning and ICC skills, though potential problems, such as varying student levels and cultural understanding, require teacher adjustments for more effective teaching.

4. Conclusion

English has become a global language of communication, requiring learners to develop communicative and ICC skills. Teachers play a dominant role in the classroom, balancing leadership with fostering student autonomy. By inspiring and guiding students, teachers can help them increase their abilities to learn independently. Real-life examples and communicative discourse improve communication abilities, while intercultural awareness develops through exploring and reflecting on cultural differences. Customizing teaching methods to suit local contexts ensures optimal ELT outcomes.

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