Student-centered Approach and Communicative Language Learning in the Exam-oriented EFL Settings

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Abstract: I analyze the situation with communication-based courses in EFL teaching in Chinese colleges. Reality is: local/foreign teachers use Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) not-very-effectively. I analyze practical aspects of the student-centered CLT model taught to passive and demotivated (in majority) private college students who suffer routine and stiff teaching techniques. I analyzed 14 foreign teachers’ instruction patterns based on my personal experience as a student. I interviewed 18 students and got responses about foreign teachers’ classes within the 3 year timeline. The students’ dominant reflection: they studied within the teacher-centered approach. Comparing Chinese and foreign teachers’ practices and students’ responses, I suggest an eclectic hybrid model combining Chinese and Western educational characteristics to aid local and foreign teachers to effectively train English learners by using the student-centered approach and CLT. Teacher’s role in hybrid student-centered classes: preparing extra materials related to textbooks. Teachers encourage students’ exploration in learning in different circumstances.

Key words
Teacher-centered approach, Student-centered approach, Communicative language learning and teaching (CLL and CLT), Demotivated students.

1. Introduction

I analyze practical aspects of different student-centered CLT (Communicative language teaching) models taught to passive and demotivated (in majority) private college students who struggle with stiff teaching techniques. I interviewed 30 students of different grades (See Appendices 1, 2) and got responses about foreign teachers’ classes within the timeline of 2 years. I analyzed 14 foreigner teachers’ instruction patterns (See Appendix 2) based on my personal experience as a student. I describe in detail what teaching methods worked well and didn’t work well with us (demotivated students in a private college in China). The teachers can get a useful insight from my analysis of how to teach the poorly motivated students. My research questions are:

1. Which teaching method is helpful in the situation of low motivation of students?
2. What role do foreign teachers play in improving students’ oral English?

The CLT (Communicative language teaching) approach in recent years has become an attractive term to cover a variety of developments in syllabus design and in the methodology of foreign language teaching. CLT was introduced to China in the early 1970s. “The demand for the approach stemmed from the unsatisfactory traditional
grammar-oriented method” (Bao & Sun, 2010) which resulted in students’ low English speaking ability. Bao and Sun cited the paper of 1979 describing what it was like in the 1970s: Celce-Murcia (1979) concluded “1) Classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language; 2) Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given; 3) Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words; 4) Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue. 5) Little or no attention is given to pronunciation. It holds true in Chinese grammar teaching. As a result, the traditional method produced unsatisfactory teaching results and students lacked the ability to speak and understand English.” Yet, the popularization of CLT met with great frustration initially. Quite a few teachers attempted to incorporate the new teaching approach in the classroom, but quickly met setbacks and acquiesced to tradition. (Shen Ping, 2010)

The progress and resistance of Communicative Language Teaching in China: “even now, a number of educators, researchers, and practitioners in the Chinese foreign language teaching community are skeptical as to whether CLT is really superior to the traditional analytical approach.” He concluded that “to fundamentally change the situation, (Chinese) teachers must undergo training that will promote their theoretical awareness as well as their linguistic abilities. (Yu, 2012)

2. Literature Review

1) “The CLT was introduced in Hong Kong in the early 1980s. The English Syllabus for Secondary Schools (Curriculum Development Committee, 1983) stressed that classrooms should provide opportunities that enable students to develop the ability of using the language meaningfully.” (Tong, 2004 writes about Hong Kong)

2) “Communicative Language Teaching in China”. Her paper aims at discussion on the application of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in China. The purpose is to get English teachers in China to know more about how can make best use of CLT. Her suggestions: (1) Improvement of teachers’ English proficiency. Students admire the teacher who can speak English fluently. Teachers are able to geared their teaching to the needs of the class and students. (2) High abilities to organize classroom activities. A) They involve using language for a purpose. B) They create a desire to communicate. C) They encourage students to be active and contribute their ideas. D) They focus on the message and students concentrate on “what” they are saying than “how” they are saying it. (Sumei Yang, 2002)

CLT as a teaching method should be working effectively in EFL classrooms; Yang’s paper gave us some suggestions about how to make the best use of CLT in classroom, but it is did not discuss it in detail, so I try to give some detailed suggestions and combine CLT with other existing teaching method: the student-centered teaching method. 1) Luo said that “The activities which teachers chose were general answering questions, reading together with classmates. There also may be a little interaction
between students and the teacher and few group works in the classroom. The only role of a student was merely a listener. But the shortages are that learners who are exposed in a long listening environment as listeners rather than participants will feel bored, fatigued, tired, undisciplined and sleepy.” (Luo, 2010)

2) Fen said that “Teacher who indulges in being the center of attention explaining the text closely in a more traditional grammar—translation way, trying to put everything into students’ heads and paying scant notice of the feelings and reactions of students. Students are just an “ignorant audience”, waiting to be filled up with knowledge by the teacher. There is little cooperation between the teacher and the students and the teacher gets little feedback from listeners. Those are the introduction of the teacher-centeredness;”(Fen, 2001)

3) Here are the information of student-centeredness: Li said that “In student-centered teaching, the main idea behind the practice is that learning is most meaningful when topics are relevant to the students’ lives, needs and interests and when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding and connecting to knowledge. Teacher shares control of the classroom and students are allowed to explore, experiment, and discover on their own. The students are given choices and are included in the decision-making process of the classroom, the focus in these classrooms is on options, rather than uniformity.” (Li, 2008) So, CLL and CLT have been used in China by local and foreign teachers long enough and there must be enough experience in using it in China (by foreign and Chinese instructors), but what is missing – detailed descriptions of how to implement CLL/CLT and student-centered approach, particularly with not very motivated students and in the audience that lacks initiative. I concentrate on this area.

3. Definition of the Teacher-centered and Student-centered Approaches

It is based on a simple fact: the one who speaks more in class is the center. The students speak more than 50% of the class time - it’s a student-centered class. Ideally, it would be nice, if the teacher speaks less than one student in class. E.g. in an English language class of 25 students, the teacher talks less than 4 % of the class time, it will be the ultimate student-centered class and the best representation of the student-centered method, but it is very hard to achieve. I used the open-ended questionnaires with 15 questions, see Appendix 1. I sent them out to 20 students in my class and other 10 students in other classes as a pilot project. I received 30 filled in questionnaires total. I use my own observations throughout years 2010-2012 (I use the ethnographic remarks where they are appropriate). After collecting the answers from the first 4 students, I picked up several specific points and consolidated my questionnaires. Here are the comments of students’: Student A: “I’d like to have time to speak, not just listen to the foreign teacher speaking, even thought in the writing or reading class, I also need chances to express my ideas, and I want to know what other classmates think.”
Student B: “I think teaching grammar is not the foreign teacher’s major job, they don’t need to pay attention to this part, we have Chinese teachers who are professors in grammar.”

4. Results of the Survey

All students (N=30) thought that they want to improve their English expression from classes and the foreigner teachers should help them to improve their oral English skills. 10 students (33%) said that they want to improve their listening skills in the foreign teachers’ class. 27 students (90 %) emphasized that they want to improve their oral English. None of them thought that foreign teachers should teach them grammar, they thought that teaching grammar is the Chinese teachers’ responsibility.

The students I interviewed felt (mostly) that they can’t learn useful skills in the Communication class. Their dominant idea is – “It’s just oral English, not preparation for the exams”. So it’s a paradoxical situation – the class is based on communication, but students concern about exams related to English, including the oral component of the TEM 4/8. Regarding the TEM 4 exam (the oral component): in my class, the average pass-rate is higher than in my college which is 22.7 % in 2012 and, at the same time, 72.56% in China. (Xie et al. 2012). (Retried from http://www.huaue.com/dlxy/20121011154421.htm)This is the big gap between my college and the whole country’s standard. We don’t use the most of the resources of foreign teachers in our college. I classified my 14 foreigner teachers’ teaching ways into teacher-centered or student-centered on the following basis:

Teacher-centered:
1. The teachers speak more than students in the class.
2. The teachers always use the same teaching method.
3. Students have little opportunity to interact with the teacher or with themselves.

Student-centered:
1. The teacher speaks less than all the students in class.
2. Students have opportunities to interact with the teachers and their classmates
3. The teacher uses various methods in the whole semester.

5. Data Analysis

The Comprehensive English Course, teachers (A, B, C, D, E)

Teacher A (Comprehensive 1): His class was based on the teacher-centered method, he spoke more than half of the class time. He asked us to read the textbook but didn't analyze the articles in the textbook. He rarely used the textbook’s exercises. Sometimes, he just talked about his experiences in China, e.g. traveling. My conclusion: We did not have enough chances to express ourselves.

Teacher B (Comprehensive 2): He used the teacher-centered method. He talked in class almost 80% of class time. He asked students to use new words from the texts
and made sentences according his requirements (contextualizing). He always played English records made by himself as dictation for us. He thought these parts were connected with the TEM 4. He assigned a lot of homework. In his class, some parts were really boring, so some students didn't like his class and skipped it.

My conclusion: He occupied most of the class time, so we rarely spoke in his class.

Teacher C (Comprehensive 3, 4, two semesters): He used the student-centered method in his class. He encouraged students to express their opinions about the textbook’s stories and assignments. He tried to make students to play the leading role in class (facilitating the class). He asked students to answer questions in the textbook. In his class, if we didn't preview our textbook’s stories, we didn't know the point he wanted us to figure out. However, not all the students accepted his teaching method, some of them skipped the class which is forbidden in China.

My conclusion: In his class, most of us had enough chances to speak out.

Teacher D, E (Comprehensive 5): Last term, our college changed the mode we used before in the Comprehensive class. So we have three teachers (two foreign teachers and one Chinese) to teach us alternating every two weeks. These two foreign teachers were both using teacher-centered method in class because they spoke most of the time in the class. But there were some differences.

Teacher D: In his class, he spoke a lot about importance of TEM 4/8 (which is strange for foreign teachers, normally foreigners don’t even know about the Chinese national exams), and he repeated a lot about his own experiences about learning French and Chinese, which is useless for us. Even he assigned us to read the texts, but we all feel bored.

My conclusion: He used too much time of the class, we seldom had time to communicate in English.

Teacher E: He spoke more than 50 percent of class time. What he said is related to our textbooks and English learning skills. He asked us to answer questions and paraphrase the sentences in the articles. Sometimes he explained the textbook’s stories in detail, or gave us some listening exercise, which made the class more interesting than teacher D’s.

My conclusion: We have enough chances to speak English in his class due to answering his questions.

Newspaper Reading. Teachers F, G, H

Teacher F: He used the student-centered method. Students’ learning range comprises speaking, reading and writing, it is not just about exams. He did a lot of preparation before class making interesting PowerPoints. He checked students’ homework carefully (up to correcting every individual mistake in students’ summaries) so that students take homework seriously. He would use different approaches in the class to let the class be active (e.g. little games and students’ stage performances, reading
reports, public speeches, group discussions). In his class, all students in our class said that they enjoy this kind of teaching patterns, they can share their ideas about the articles in the newspaper and learn from others. The activities he provided us were very interesting, we learnt a lot skills about reading and speech. We can make the most use of the class time.

My conclusion: We had enough chances to express our ideas in his class to improve our oral English.

Teacher G: She used the teacher-centered method in her class and talked more than half of the class time. In her class, we followed her arrangement to read the articles in newspapers. At the same time, she tried to use various ways to make the class active. We didn't do as many activities in the first semester, but we enjoyed her class.

My conclusion: In her class, some of us talked a lot.

Teacher H: He used the teacher-centered method. We listened to him more than half of the class time. In his class, we had many chances for group discussions. However, during the discussions we would speak Chinese sometimes.

My conclusion: We had many chances to speak English in his class.

Communication Class. Teacher I, J, K

Teacher I (Communication 1): He used student-centered method. In his class, he firstly started a topic which was related to our textbook, then he would talk with us. He noticed each student in our class. He encouraged the students who were seldom spoke in the class to speak more. He also corrected our pronunciation errors during conversations.

My conclusion: In his class, we spoke a lot of English to express our opinions about the topics.

Teacher J: Communication 2. She use the teacher-centered method. When we had her class, she always followed the order of the textbook which made her class boring. Things get better after she taught us to do some handicrafts and gave us special cookies which related with western holidays. She often corrected our pronunciation. The standard English accent of her provided us a good chance to imitate.

My conclusion: In her class, only the students, who wanted to speak, spoke a lot.

Teacher K (Communication 3): He used teacher-centered method. He spoke half of the class time during his class. He always full of energy in his class and reminded us to ask him if we didn't understand what he was talking about. He talked not only about the topics in our textbooks, which helped us to learn what we couldn't learn from our textbooks.

My conclusion: We had enough chances to communicate with him and our classmates.

Writing Teacher: L, M
Teacher L (semester 1,2): His class was based on the teacher-centered method, he spoke more than half of the class time. In his class, he taught us to change the writing patterns what we have learnt in high school. He encouraged us to be creative when we were writing. He often showed us the general mistakes that we made in our essays and taught how to correct them. He was very serious about our essays. He corrected each student's essay up to correcting every individual mistake. He usually discussed one by one to help us to improve our writing skills during his office hours.
My conclusion: In his class, we had enough chances to ask questions about our essays.

Teacher M (semester 5): His class was based on teacher-centered. He spoke more than 50% of the class time. He prepared carefully before his class. We could tell that from his PowerPoints and the data he handed out. He sent us email with attached files to review what we have learnt in his class and reminded us to do homework. He gave evaluation to each one. He corrected every individual mistake in our essays. He asked us to write outline and collected materials before we wrote. After he corrected our essays, we had to rewrite and handed them to him to correct again.
My conclusion: In his class, we did not have many chances to speak out in English.

Holistic English (Semester 1,2): Teacher N. He used the teacher-centered teaching method and spoke most of the class time. His class was about watching English movies. He showed us movies once in two weeks. After watching movies, we had to write our opinions about the movie. He often asked us to read the English tongue twisters that he handed us one by one in his class.
My conclusion: We felt very bored in his class, so that we did not like to participate in the activities he provided. Below, I provide the description of the course objectives taken from the holistic English in China website. As we can see the goals and the reality differ.

“The Holistic English Course in China: (Retrieved from their official website http://chinaholisticenglish.org/) The Holistic English Program replaces traditional oral English learning with a conversation-based English acquisition experience; replaces teachers with facilitators; replaces set phrase or speech pattern memorization with language acquisition; develops self-confidence, intrinsic motivation and develops autonomous learners and creative thinkers; replaces graduates who cannot produce comprehensible English with those who can.”

I analyzed the teaching practices of the 14 foreign teachers in my college. Results: 11 (more than 78%) of them used the teacher-centered teaching method, the other three used the student-centered teaching method. Among the teachers who used the teacher-centered teaching method, only four teachers’ class provided students enough chances to speak English. In the other two teachers’ class who used the teacher-centered teaching method, some students in my class had enough chances to speak out in English. Students had enough chances to speak and improve their spoken
English in the student-centered teaching method class.

I summarized the foreign teachers in my college did not play an efficient role in improving students’ oral English. I have found that the ratio of teaching methods in my college as follows: 3 out of 14 (21.4 %) foreign teachers use the student-centered method. It’s still very-very low despite the fact that mostly foreigners teach at our college. Even foreign teachers use the teacher-centered method too much.

6. Discussion

1. In the student-centered method classes, each students have chances to express their ideas, the class atmosphere is lively, they have different assignments in the whole semester, such as group performances, discussions, public speeches and role playing.
2. In the students-centered class, the teacher can make well use the CLT, the CLT and student-centered combine well with each other in the English language teaching.
I summarized the foreign teachers' features in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Foreign Teachers' Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject and Aspect of classroom teaching</th>
<th>Foreign teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s role in class</td>
<td>Teacher as a coach, partner, designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s role in class</td>
<td>Students are participants, thinkers, speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study range</td>
<td>Culture, practical application of the learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on</td>
<td>Personal understanding, skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning through</td>
<td>Active participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers pay attention to</td>
<td>Content, application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ input</td>
<td>Students have enough chances to express themselves, they participate in class well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s goal</td>
<td>Teacher tries to give chances to each student to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching method</td>
<td>Teachers use various approaches and techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The communication based courses should improve students’ ability of listening and oral communication and expressing. Now the phenomenon in my college is the teachers (even the FT who is supposed to do it in the CLT way as s/he is supposedly not aware of any other methods) speak more than the students, students are still passive. I argue that the students should be in active as learners; the teachers should be skillful enough to yield more time for the learners to speak.
7. Suggestions

How to use CLT/student-centered more in classroom (for local/foreigner teachers) is that teacher’s role in the class should be: a guide, a designer, an organizer. They should create more questions for students to encourage them to think and answer. Use different forms in class: group discussions, students’ PPT and performances, debates, role playing, work together to write a short story, an analysis of news. Relate the book content to the students' real life: let students talk about the things which happen in the daily life or the heated topics to express their own opinions. Encourage the students to express, especially for those inactive students. Use different circumstances in different atmosphere that make the class in a relaxed atmosphere when students in discussion. Teacher should give the summary to the class to collect feedback: a) After watching the students’ performances, teacher should give the summary. b) Ask students to evaluate the other students’ work: advantages or disadvantages. Students like to get feedback from teachers, this is also a good chance for them to express their own opinions. They should pay attention to the feedback, do it on a regular time (it is better to do it once a week).

8. Conclusion

In college where students are not good at test-taking (failed the Gaokao) and the classes are mixed-ability groups with a mixture of active (minority) and idle and passive (majority) learners, teacher should use a big variety of methods (student-centered and CLT) in the English language class. CLT and student-centeredness can be combined well with each other in communication-based courses in EFL teaching.

References


Luo, Lingxia. (2010). Reflection on Teacher-centered strategy in college English Classroom in Read and Write Periodical February, vol 7, No. 2


Appendices

1. Questionnaire in English

1. Overall, do you think that you can learn useful communication skills in the Communication class?
2. After two years of the Communication course, do you think that your ability of listening and speaking have a development?
3. Which foreign teacher’s teaching method do you like best? Why?
4. Which foreign teacher’s teaching method do you dislike most? Why?
5. Are you active in the communication class, and why you are active or not?
6. Do you think that students have enough chances in communication classes to express their own opinions?
7. Do you think that the questions and topics which teacher gave are so easy and boring?
8. Would you like have more discussion about the hot topics or things which relate to your daily life?
9. What do you want to improve after having the communication course (the expression, speaking or listening)?
10. Did you pass the oral component of the TEM4?
11. If you passed the TME4 oral exam, how did you prepare the exam?
12. Should the communication course give help for the TME4 oral exam?
13. Would you prefer these methods in the communication class? (group discussion, debate, PPT performance, role playing, the news analysis)
14. Do you want to get more advice from the teachers about oral communication?
15. Do you think that it is necessary to give a feedback to the teacher regularly?

2. Class Observation Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Observation Form</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEACHER OBSERVED: pong Yun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBJECT: French</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LESSON TOPIC:
Study the third lesson

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY:
Teacher’s demonstration, PPT to explain the grammar

CLASSROOM ORGANISATION, % of the teacher’s input, % of the students’ input:
Teacher’s input is about 60%: explain the text, grammar and show the pronunciation
Students’ input is about 40%; follow the teacher’s, practice reading the text

STUDENT Group ACTIVITIES, General description:
1. Followed the teachers’ pronunciation and practiced the French.
2. Had the dictation about the new vocabulary.
3. Recap the lesson 1 and lesson 2’s texts.
4. Learn the new grammar

STUDENT Individual ACTIVITIES, were student facilitator used, when, where, how:
no

STUDENT Individual ACTIVITIES, did student answer questions the teacher asked, when, how:
Teacher picked up some students to answer

STUDENT Individual ACTIVITIES, general description:
Serious

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE LESSON:
Students learned the lesson 3 and finished well the homework

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE LESSON:
In the second lesson, a few students’ concentration lapsed. In the third lesson, 40% students can’t pay attention

OVERALL COMMENTS ON THE LESSON:
In 125 minutes’ class, it is hard to let students accept all the knowledge well.