# Importance of using eclectic approach in teaching

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**Abstract**:    This paper presents an eclectic model of teaching English majors the *Comprehensive English* course at the university level. The new approach to ELT described combines strengths from the traditional teaching, communicative language teaching (CLT) and the context approach (CA) (Bax, 2003) in order to suit the current English as a foreign language (EFL) at the university level. It consists of three interrelated stages in teaching English majors the *Comprehensive English* course: *pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading,* and each stage focuses on different and specific dimensions. The new approach treats language teaching and learning as an organic process and includes reading at the syntactical level (bottom-up stage) and reading at the textual and discourse level (top-down stage). The top-down stage is more significant in language teaching because it is this stage that enables the progression of a synthesized approach to take place. The proposed eclectic model is different from traditional teacher-centred practices in which teachers tend to treat new words, phrases and sentence structure patterns as discrete language points and elaborate upon them over-meticulously while the gist of the text is usually overlooked. Furthermore, the proposed approach is aimed at helping teachers to overcome the weakness of teacher-centeredness. In this eclectic approach, the prevalent methods of teaching comprehensive courses are the starting point and CLT and CA are employed to complement them. The purpose for such a synthesis is to cultivate learners' communicative competence as required by the revised curriculum for English majors at the university level.

**Introduction**:  Since the late 1980s there has been a top-down movement to reform English language teaching (ELT) in many countries  An important component of English language teaching reform has been an effort to import communicative language teaching (CLT). (Hu, 2002). However, attempts to introduce CLT into ELT in teaching have provoked a great deal of comment and debate. Whereas some researchers have emphasized the value of adopting CLT teaching (Li, 1984; Maley, 1984; Xiao, 2005), others have noted the importance of Chinese traditional ways of teaching and learning (Harvey, 1985; Sampson, 1984; Sano *et al*., 1984). Still many researchers have focused on the need to adapt CLT to the demands and conditions for ELT in China (Anderson, 1993; Rao, 1996, 2002; Xiao, 2005, 2006a). Within this debate on English teaching methodology, the study of Chinese students' perceptions and attitudes to CLT deserves particular attention. Some earlier studies show that Chinese students are inclined to prefer a pleasant mixture of classroom-based learning activities that emphasize both communicative components of CLT and formal grammatical correctness of the traditional approach (Rao, 2002; Xiao, 2005, 2006). Therefore, an eclectic approach which can combine the strengths of different approaches .EFL learners' needs is necessary.

## Communicative Language Teaching vs. The Traditional Approach

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been an influential approach for at least two decades. The very term 'communicative' carries an obvious ring of truth: we 'learn to communicate by communicating' (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.131). CLT advocates learning a language through use. In contrast with the traditional approach, which stresses teacher classroom dominance and a very detailed study of grammar, extensive use of paraphrase and the translation and memorization of structural patterns and vocabulary, CLT emphasizes the competence of using language for communication. Learning is regarded as a process of natural growth rather than acquiring isolated items of language. As learners have their own active mechanisms for making sense of language input and constructing their own systems while receiving linguistic input, what teachers need to do is to help them operate these natural mechanisms by providing them with "triggers". In lessons, teachers can facilitate acquisition by assisting students to practice so that they can learn to use language actively for real

communicative needs. CLT has some common features of practice that derive from its basic principles. First, classrooms are learner-oriented. Second, opportunities are provided through developing a wide repertoire of activities. Third, the teacher's roles are multiple. Instead of imparting knowledge and skills to learners, s/he may act as animator, co-communicator or counselor in the classroom. Fourth, authentic materials are used in teaching. (Nunan, 1991, 1993; Mey, 1998).

## Related Research to Date

China has the largest national population of English language learners in the world, and China is deeply involved in CLT since it was first introduced into the country in the early 1980s. However, due to multiple constraints including the linguistic competence of Chinese EFL teachers, China has had to work hard to adapt CLT to the local conditions. In China, most teachers claim to use a communicative approach in some way or other, and it is hardly surprising that no one wishes to be called a non-communicative teacher. However, as CLT was borne and developed in Western countries, it is not universally applicable in Asian contexts without proper adaptation (Ellis, 1996; Hu, 2005). The problem lies in that modified varieties of CLT might suit some present conditions for the time being, but they are far from scientific, since, as practiced in the classroom, they are not usually selected on the basis of classroom-based or academic research (Leng, 1997). In many cases, whether CLT is seen to be difficult, effective, or is rejected as inappropriate,

(i.e. reports on its implementation) have been based mainly on teachers' own perceptions of CLT (Li, 1998). Only a few studies have investigated learners' views, and fewer studies still, have looked at learner views of communicative practices in the classroom.

Some researchers argue for a combination of the strengths from different approaches (Liu, 2004). Liu holds that English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers choose a teaching method not because of its professional or theoretical worth, but rather because it allows them to cope efficiently with the realities of the environment. In his opinion, if L2/EFL students are actively using the target language and teaching materials and activities meet the needs of the students, whatever teaching method is used does not matter much. Many researchers contend that both the CLT and traditional approach have their own advantages and disadvantages. Hence, a combination of the strengths from different approaches is the best (Hu, 2002; Rao, 2002; Xiao, 2005). Horwitz (1988) suggests, classroom realities that contradict learner expectations about learning may disappoint them and thus interfere with the attainment of desired learning outcomes. Harvey (1985), based on his experience of teaching English in China, finds the constructive side of the traditional approach useful in class. He asserts that:

What might be called "traditional" methods and skills [in China] are not fundamentally or necessarily unworkable alongside modern EFL teaching methods. The idea that the two are mutually exclusive is absurd. EFL in China needs Western experience and expertise, not Western dogma. A balanced approach and the use of existing potential both have a fundamental part to play in the development of language teaching in China (Harvey, 1985, p.186).

Rao (2002) studied the views of 30 Chinese university students on the appropriateness and effectiveness of communicative and non-communicative activities in their EFL courses in China. He discovered that the students' perceived difficulties caused by CLT had their source in the differences between the underlying educational theories of China and those of Western countries. He argues that updating English teaching methods in China needs to combine the "new" with the "old" to align the communicative approach with traditional teaching structures. But his suggestions are far from pedagogically concrete.

Xiao (2005) conducted a large scale empirical study of Chinese English majors and their teachers at the university level. He reported that although both the students and teachers concerned were inclined to see classroom activities emphasizing the real use of the target

language as more effective than those emphasizing formal grammatical competence, they, however, viewed it inappropriate to totally abandon the traditional approach in favour of CLT as the notions underpinning CLT are not very compatible with the Chinese ELT context.

In reality, what we can infer from relevant studies lies in that the real issue is not to abandon the traditional approach, but to improve and modernize it. In other words, to reconcile it with CLT in such a way that both approaches complement each other. Such assertions also support some earlier studies by some other Chinese researchers (Wen, 1996; Su & Zhuang, 1996). These studies reflect the reality that no single approach can cover all aspects of English teaching and learning. In the case of CLT, various challenges confronting Chinese EFL teachers and students in their attempts to use CLT have to be taken into account and a synthesis of different approaches should be created to suit the Chinese context. Such views are also echoed by Western researchers as well.

O'Neill (1991) draws our attention to the characteristics of English language lessons that worked well using either teacher-centeredness or student-centeredness. He emphasizes that "the critical skills that teachers need are to use their discretion to judge and select which of the two types of approaches is most likely to yield fruitful results with a particular class at a particular time" (p. 290) so that the two approaches are complementary to each other. In other words, teachers should be aware of the necessity and importance of choosing an appropriate teaching approach to suit a particular situation or context since English teaching methodologies are neither

culturally-free, nor culturally transferable without proper adaptation (Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Some researchers also point out that evaluation of a particular method depends on many factors, such as language and learning theories, teaching techniques, syllabus design and teacher and learner roles. One factor that is often easily ignored is that of *context*. A method that can be considered beneficial in one context may not be so in another. (Huang, 1996; Bax, 2003). Some Western researchers also support this view and make critical comments on CLT. For instance, Bax (2003) stresses that although CLT has served a useful function in the L2 profession particularly as a corrective to shortcomings in previous methodologies, CLT has always neglected one key aspect of language teaching, namely the *context* in which it takes place. Bax further suggests that the first priority is the *learning context*, and the first step in ELT is to identify key aspects of that *context* before deciding what and how to teach in any given class. According to Bax, the *context* refers to the teacher's understanding of individual students and their learning needs, wants, styles, and strategies as well as the course-book, local conditions, the classroom culture, school culture, national culture and so on. By taking into account all these factors as much as possible in each situation, teachers will be able to identify a suitable approach and language focus. Methodological decisions will thus depend on the results of a '*context analysis*'. In Bax's opinion, it may be that an emphasis on grammar is useful to start with, or perhaps an emphasis on oral communication. It may be that lexis will come first, or it may be that group-work is more suitable than a more formal lecture mode.

In congruence with the above pro-integration point of views from both Chinese and Western researchers mentioned above, this study shows that, in order to ensure effective English language teaching and learning outcomes, neither the traditional nor the pure CLT approach can be wholly embraced without adequate modification to suit the present ELT situations in China at the tertiary level. In other words, an appropriate approach will probably be an eclectic one, so as to meet the Chinese ELT context. Given the situation described above, China needs to combine CLT with the traditional approach to benefit from the combined strengths of different approaches. Any teaching methodology has its own reasons to exist. Everything depends on the specific situations -- the 'context' in Bax's term, where the methods are used and popularized. The teacher and learner variables determine which methods, textbooks, and teaching styles will fit in with the stated pedagogical goals. As is evident above, it is important that communicative features of CLT should

be integrated into the prevalent Chinese pedagogical practices. For such a beneficial integration to happen in many approaches, it is necessary for EFL researchers and teachers to take an eclectic approach and make 'well-informed pedagogical choices grounded in an understanding of socio-cultural influences' (Hu, 2002).

**The Purpose of This Study**

While the above studies report EFL learner and teacher perceptions in implementing communicative language teaching, few have looked at concrete eclectic approaches to teaching EFL compulsory courses at the university level, and as such, this paper examines the C*omprehensive English* (*Reading)* course from the perspective of combining the strengths of different approaches with respect to classroom practice.

This paper analyses an eclectic approach to teaching English to English majors at the university level. It offers insights into the curricular and methodological changes currently being implemented in the university context. The proposed eclectic model as shown below in Chart-1, combines the strengths of the traditional approach, CLT and the context approach (CA). It treats the EFL context as the most important starting point for establishing a suitable approach to ensure effective outcomes of EFL teaching. This new approach does not negate the view that language is for communication, but it questions the assumed universal applicability of CLT.

Meanwhile, the extent to which communicative components in instructional practices are seen by learners as essential for classroom language learning should be taken into account when making pedagogical decisions. As is evident from the discussion above, at present this proposed eclectic model may offer a more realistic framework for EFL education in the Chinese context than merely rejecting or embracing CLT in a wholesale manner. Instead, the key issue of innovation in ELT methodology discard the traditional approach, but to improve upon and adapt it (Harvey, 1985; Anderson, 1993; Rao, 1996; 2002; Hu, 2002).

**Conclusion**

This paper presents an eclectic approach for teaching English major students the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course at the university level. As shown in Chart-1 below, an eclectic approach in this study means, in a broad sense, the combination of strengths taken from both the CLT and traditional teaching practices that have proven useful and effective in the past. The eclectic approach also includes the ideas proposed in context approach (Bax, 2003). According to Bax, the context in which EFL learning and teaching takes places is a crucial factor in the success or failure of learners because contextual factors hugely influence learners' ability to effectively learn a foreign language (Bax, 2003).

In other words, an eclectic approach to ELT combines the strengths deriving from the traditional teaching, communicative language teaching and context approach in order to suit the current ELT context in China. It consists of three interrelated stages in teaching English major students the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course: *pre-reading, while-reading* and *post-reading,* with each stage focusing on different and specific dimensions. The new approach treats language teaching and learning as an organic process, and as such includes reading at the syntactical level (bottom-up stage) and reading at the textual and discourse level (top-down stage). The top-down stage is more significant in language teaching because it is this stage that enables the progression of a synthesized approach to take place. The proposed model in this study is different from traditional teacher-centered practices in which teachers intend to treat new words, phrases and sentence structure patterns as discrete language points and elaborate upon them over-meticulously while the gist of the text is usually overlooked. Furthermore, the eclectic approach is aimed at helping teachers to overcome the weakness of teacher-centeredness. In this eclectic approach, the prevalent methods of teaching *Comprehensive English (Reading)* courses are the starting point and CLT and the context approach (CA) are employed to complement them. The purpose for such a synthesis is to cultivate learners' communicative competence as required by the new curriculum. (English Division, 2000) for English major students at the university level.