Functional Outcomes from the Communicative Approach
To College English Reading Class

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Abstract
The paper intends to study the communicative approach to the teaching of English reading and attempts to solve the problem of “dumb” and “deaf” way of language learning. Following the theories of language acquisition, discourse analysis and principles on learner autonomy, the author firstly clarifies the necessity and effectiveness of adopting the communicative approach in the teaching of reading, then carries out a reform of activities in reading class. After a two-semester contrastive study, the advantages of communicative approach can be clearly seen.

In conclusion, the communicative approach may not only improve students’ overall ability in the use of language but also develop students’ learning autonomy and elicit their interest in English learning. Therefore, communicative approach might become the tendency for the teaching of College English.

Key words: communicative approach, teaching reading from discourse perspective, classroom activities, learner-centered approach, learner autonomy

I. Introduction
While college English teaching has made great progress, it still has a lot of problems, especially the one so-called “deaf” and “dumb” way of language learning. In order to meet the needs of society, make College English teaching more effective, and fully develop students’ overall ability of English, the author intends to study on the communicative approach to the teaching of College English reading.

Before the year of 2000, the author had been instructing the same set of text books for over 10 years, which was mainly designed to follow the traditional pattern of teaching and limited the teachers to conduct the classroom activities in a trapped way. The new textbook by Ying HuiLan designed with the principles of student-centered approach and learner-autonomy provided the supplementary aids for teachers to practice communicative approach. So the author decided to make use of the advantages of the new textbook and apply the communicative approach in the teaching practice.

The research started from the September of 2002. Eight non-English major classes from Automobile College in Jilin University were randomly chosen as two contrastive study groups. Four classes of the subjects were controlled with the communicative approach in their classroom management; the other four were still taught in the traditional way, which concentrated on language points, and guided comprehension of the text mainly depended on the grammar translation method. The study lasted eight months, two semesters. The purpose of the study was to find out the
II. Theoretical basis of the study

Widdowson (1972) points out that the root of the problem, the learners’ deficiency in the ability to actually use the language, is to be found in the approach itself.

Littlewood (1981) states that many aspects of language learning can take place only through natural processes, which operate when a person is involved in using the language for communication and the learners’ ultimate objective is to take in communication with others.

Therefore the research designs to adopt communicative approach and teach English as communication so as to solve the problem of “deaf” and “dumb” English.

Krashen says that the key aspect of second language acquisition is an unconscious process resulting from experience in using the language, and this process is not directly benefited by the conscious learning of, for example, grammatical rules. Therefore, teachers do not intend to teach much to students but create a condition or an atmosphere for them to acquire English by using it in all the reading, listening, speaking and writing skills simultaneously through classroom activities which are organized to offer environment and opportunities for students to obtain, convey, exchange information and discuss or express their own opinions. In this way, the research assumes to make students, in the course of College English learning, learn to use English for real communication.

According to Ellis (1997), whether one is considered to be a good language learner or a poor language learner depends very much on one’s definition of language. The research therefore believes that what should be looked for in the language learners, especially the non-English-major College students, is the overall ability to communicate and the fluency in their use of the language. That is to say, as long as students can get the information from what they read and what they listen and clearly convey the information to the others or express their own opinions, they could be considered as successful English learners.

Nevertheless, the problem is how to effectively use the limited class time for the non-English majors to improve their overall language competence by teaching them English as communication with the textbook which is mainly composed for reading courses. So the key of the research consists in the reform of activities in reading classes. That is to say, we have to find a way to help students interpret the text quickly and efficiently so as to reserve much time to carry out the activities to involve students in the use of language for communication.

Widdowson (1978) relates that we should teach language as communication and not as a stock of usage which may never be realized in actual use at all. He also points out that “an overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities (1978:67).” In this sense, explaining and exercising too much of the language points as in traditional approach might be considered as a waste of time. Therefore there is a need to take discourse into account in our teaching of language. Instead of linguistic skills, English reading is assumed to be taught from discourse perspective.

Understanding the interactive reading process expressed by Murcia and Olshtain (2000), it is known that top-down and bottom-up processing take place simultaneously. In bottom-up processing, the problem of language knowledge or linguistic skills has been assumed to be known or be able to
be solved all by students themselves. Some of cohesive devices and the important reading strategies
could be gradually introduced or mentioned to students and finally exert an imperceptible influence
on their reading habits. In top-down processing, the purpose of reading in this research has been
decided on getting information from the reading material; and content schemata depend on the prior
knowledge accumulated in their daily life or study. So what we have to deal with in class is to help
students get aware of the discourse structure of the passage they are reading. The research assumes
that students might gradually get familiar with different discourse styles, finally form the schemata
in mind, which, thereafter, might also exert imperceptible influence on their reading habits. It is
supposed to be the quick and efficient way to comprehend the reading passage and catch the main
idea of it. So students are asked to identify the discourse structure and draw the outline of the article
in order to help students understand the global structure and general content. That is what we mean
by teaching reading from discourse perspective.

Trying to focus on global structure and general content of the passage in reading class doesn’t
mean we never deal with the problems of local structure and details. They are solved by encouraging
students to identify them in their spare time and then put them forward in class. In this way, it might
be avoided to explain those that have already been clear to students.

From the description above, it is self-evident that the effectiveness of the approach largely
depends on how well students preview the materials or how much effort students exert after class. In
order to persuade or encourage students to do much learning all by themselves after class, the
research is designed to clarify to students the learner-centered approach and necessity and
importance of learner autonomy; and make them aware that, as Snow (1996) notes, they will learn
more effectively if they are active participants in the process than if they only passively follow the
teacher’s instructions; and that as Brow (1991) states, not even the world’s best language teacher can
guarantee success in language learning; a language learner can—and must—take control of his own
language learning and assume responsibility for his success or failure. So the research intends to find
ways to promote students’ learning autonomy from very beginning, or help them to develop the
ability to take charge of their own learning.

III. Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were proposed from the very beginning of the study:
1. The communicative approach can help the students to acquire their vocabulary on their own
   while they were taking part in the reading activities.
2. The communicative approach can help the students to improve their overall ability in the use of
   language and elicit their interest in English learning.

IV. Procedures of the study

Four procedures were followed in the study
1. Pre-study Survey: A self-designed questionnaire concerning the students’ understanding of the
discourse structures and reading strategies was made and handed to 116 students at the
beginning of their first classes. The data collected back showed that only 26.7% students had
known something about English discourse structures before; and 15% of them expressed that
they had no reading strategies at all. The conclusion was that it was very necessary to introduce
the discourse knowledge and reading strategies in the following studies.
2. Making students psychologically ready for the new approach: Chinese students are accustomed to the passive, dependent ways of teaching, so they are always waiting quietly for the teacher to feed them; and the new approach has broken their used teacher-centered pattern of teaching in high school. So, in order to make sure that students get psychologically ready for the new approach, at the beginning of the very first classes, a brief lecture was made on the principles of learner-centered approach and learner autonomy. In this way, students would be aware of the roles of themselves and teachers in class, the necessity and significance of the new approach and the importance of the fulfillment of their after-class tasks. Then instructions were announced to make students clear what to do in and after each class and make them encouraged to be in charge of their own learning.

3. Another survey conducted during the teaching process: It is designed to test the students’ understanding of cohesive devices, also to provide the guidance for teachers in their future teaching. Two major problems were indicated in the test: 82.1% of the students found they had difficulty in identifying the lexical- cohesion of general nouns; and 78.6% out of them could not clearly identify the substitutions of the synonymies.

4. The steps to conduct the classroom activities

Three steps were taken to conduct classroom activities, which guarantee the success of the new approach.

1) Warm-up activities:

Before reading, activities such as group discussion, pair work, or individual presentation were organized to generally discuss the topic, so as to make students naturally link the previous and unknown knowledge together. These activities could both open students’ the background knowledge and elicit their interest in the topic.

To get students involved in the activities is the most important task for teachers especially at the early stages. I tried several means. In group discussions I appointed a team leader to make sure that everyone in the group would open his mouth. And I assigned much more pair-work, which I believe can make students get into full involvement.

“Changing Partner”, reformed from an activity called “circle discussion”, is considered to be the most effective pair-work activity. Students were asked to stand by their desks and work with their neighbors discussing the first question prepared by the teacher before hand for 2 to 3 minutes, then one of the pair moved forward or backward to “change partner” to discuss another question for the same period of time. It could be carried on and on if time allows or until the prepared questions were used up. Each time, every student would be guaranteed to have a new question and a new partner. Sometimes the teacher had to participate in the activity as a partner. Both the students and teachers loved the game very much, and it was noticed that during the time of the activity everyone in the class enjoyed talking in English and sometimes it was hard for the teacher to stop them. After the activities some of the ideas would be shared in the whole class. These activities really created an active and enthusiastic class atmosphere.

2) Reading activities:

Students were asked to pre-read the passages before class, and in class, we mainly focused on the different discourse structures, such as narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. Teachers and students together analyzed the features of different discourse
structures and drew the outline of the article to make sure students understand the global structure and obtain the important information. Sometimes comprehension questions made up by teachers themselves were used to check if students had already got the important information in the article. In order to save time, the questions were seldom answered by a single student, but the whole class offers the answer in chorus, except when only minority of the class could give the answer. Then we solved the problems of the local structure and details by encouraging students to ask questions or by predicting possible difficulties, especially such discourse devices as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion.

Occasionally, some passages were read in class, but in different ways. Predictive reading activity and jigsaw reading activity were the two of the most effective ones. In this way, we can make students involve themselves in thinking about both the global and local structure of the article and train their ability to make predictions.

① A predictive reading activity

This is a good activity for narrative passages. The story could be divided into several parts and students were asked to read only one part in a limited period of time. Then students were asked to work in small groups to predict what would happen later, and each one in the group had to offer their own prediction, and chooses the most interesting one to share with the whole class. And then with different expectation they went on to read the following part. The students who got the same or similar thought with the author felt thrilled, and those who made the different prediction were also amused.

② A Jigsaw reading activity

First, the teacher selected a passage with clear structure and cohesive devices, divided the passage into paragraphs and made copies of each paragraph for students. Then the teacher assigned each group of the students to read only one paragraph within a limited period of time. While reading, they were asked to find the main idea or topic sentence, find supporting ideas and predict what the following and/or the previous paragraph is/are about. The students had to read, discuss and settle difficulties in their own groups and made sure everyone in the group totally understand it. Then the activity could go in the following two alternative ways:

A. Choose one student from each group to give presentation by explaining the main idea and pointing out the major information or the important discourse marks, while the others had to listen carefully and take notes. After every group finished their presentation, they were aware what each paragraph was mainly about, and then they had to work in groups again to decide the order of the paragraphs, explain their reasons and share their answers with the class. In the end, the whole class decided on a correct or the best one and worked out the outline of it.

B. Rearrange the class into new groups, the members of which were at least one from each of the previous groups. Then each student of the new group had to explain his paragraph to the others and made sure every one of the group understand at least the main content of all the paragraphs. Then by reasoning, they had to work together to rearrange the order and work out the outline of the article.

3) Follow-up activities:
After the reading activities, teachers made up some questions for group discussion, asked
students to comment on or argue against the author’s opinion, and express their own
opinions. All these activities were designed to guarantee the students’ active involvement in
using the language and the teachers’ job was to encourage them, offer helps and organize the
class in order to make all the activities go smoothly and effectively, and eventually improve
their overall language ability.

V. Functional outcomes from the study

The following three aspects of the outcomes from the study can reflect the success of the
communicative approach.

1. Achievement from the final examination

The following are the results from the final examination of the two contrastive groups (the group
with traditional methods---T group and the one with communicative approach---C group) after
having been taught for two semesters. What are listed here is the result of the two groups in the
parts of reading, listening and vocabulary & structure. The two sets of test papers are designed
to be exactly the same in listening and reading parts, and the vocabulary and structures are all
from the respective textbooks.

Table1: The average scores in the three parts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>part</th>
<th>class</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
<th>C4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R40</td>
<td>31.18</td>
<td>29.68</td>
<td>30.02</td>
<td>29.76</td>
<td>30.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L15</td>
<td>10.91</td>
<td>10.48</td>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>10.62</td>
<td>10.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>V15</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>8.98</td>
<td>9.11</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>9.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>part</th>
<th>class</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R40</td>
<td>30.64</td>
<td>29.34</td>
<td>28.46</td>
<td>29.82</td>
<td>29.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L15</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td>9.16</td>
<td>8.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>V15</td>
<td>8.45</td>
<td>7.88</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>8.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: R40, L15, and V15 mean full marks of reading, listening and vocabulary & structure are
40, 15 and 15. Total refers to the average scores of the four classes in each group.

Table2: the distribution of students in different score scopes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>group</th>
<th>part</th>
<th>R&lt;24</th>
<th>R≥32</th>
<th>L&lt;9</th>
<th>L≥12</th>
<th>V&lt;9</th>
<th>V≥12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C group</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T group</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The total student number of C group is 116, and that of T group is 118. The number
in this table is the number of students who get the score in the specific scope.
Judging by the performance of the final examination, it can be seen that the students in C group have done better than those in T group in all the parts of listening, reading and vocabulary; those in C group are far superior in listening part; and C-group students also did slightly better in vocabulary, which confirm the previous hypothesis. So it can be concluded that the communicative approach can improve students’ performance in examination and is not contrary to any tests.

2. Tape record of the whole classroom process with the two approaches

From the record we can see the difference between the two kinds of classroom management, traditional vs. communicative approaches.

In the traditional class, only one student had got about 4 out of 45 minutes to express themselves, and the teacher oneself controlled about 91% of the classroom activities. It was teacher-centered. While, in the communicative class, 64% of the class time, which was the 29 minutes out of the 45 was processed in the student-centered group/ pair/ role alternative discussions. Thirteen individual students got the opportunity to present their opinions and almost everyone in the class had the chance to speak English. So it is obviously learner-centered and offer students environment to use the language in real communication.

3. Feedbacks

1) Comments from the graduates

In 2001, the same method was used in an English training program for a group of newly graduated college students. After the training, I collected their comments on the training program. All but one of the 30 students who had offered their comments showed favorable attitude and acknowledged their progress in all the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in the three-month training and listening and speaking in particular. Here is one of the comments: “Our program made everyone in the class speak English and I really became my own master. But previously in college, we just sat there and nodded mechanically, no one had the chance to express his opinions. I think we were the robots that our teacher trained.”

2) Evaluation from the experts

At the end of the first semester, three university supervisors came to observe the class taught in communicative approach, and they fully confirmed the positive and effective functions of the method.

3) Responses from the participants

The feedbacks from the 116 students who had been taught with communicative approach showed that 85% of them preferred the new approach, and the others felt doubt about it.

VI. Discussion

The main outcomes of the study proved the positive confirmation of the above two hypotheses. Some previous studies by many linguists, such as Karshen, Widdowson, Littlewood, Nunan, Carrol McCarthy, Murcia & Olshaitain, Snow Brown have also supported the study.

One negative feedback from the 15% participants was that without the explanation of vocabulary and grammar from teachers, the chances of passing examinations and getting higher points would be very slim. Their worries were mainly from the motivation and attitude of their English study; it also came from the distrust and doubt of the newly applied communicative approach in the classroom activities, which broke their used teacher-centered classroom pattern in the high school. While after the one-year training, as is shown in the tables, they have done quite
well in the final exam. This again proved that communicative teaching method itself does not add any side effect on the outcomes from examination.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, by doing the contrastive study for two semesters, communicative approach to the teaching of College English reading is more advantageous and favorable than the traditional one. Students taught in communicative approach not only obtain better performance in examination but also improve their overall ability to use the language. By being offered more opportunities to express or exchange opinions in English, especially orally, they improve dramatically in listening and speaking, and they consequently realize that they can use the language in real communication, which, without doubt, will arouse their interest in English learning and then enhance the learning of other aspects of the language and learner autonomy. The development of learning autonomy may benefit students for their whole life as well as their English study in college life. In a word, the communicative approach turned out to be more advantageous over the traditional one in the aspects of the final examination results, the ability of the students to use the language in communication, the development of their learning autonomy, and the self motivated-interest in English learning, and it might be the tendency for the teaching of College English.

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