

Establishing a Comprehensive English Teaching Pattern Combining the Communicative Teaching Method and the Grammar-Translation Method

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Abstract

Based on the current contradiction between the grammar-translation method and the communicative teaching method in English teaching, this paper, starting with clarifying the task of comprehensive English as well as the definition of the two teaching methods, objectively analyzes their advantages and disadvantages and proposes establishing a new method by fusing them with an elaboration on the reasonability of combining them in the practical teaching of comprehensive English with their complementary advantages.

Keywords: The communicative teaching method, The grammar-translation method, Comprehensive English Teaching, Fusion and Complementation

Comprehensive English is a compulsory course for non-English majors in vocational schools to cultivate their comprehensive capacity and skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. It involves both the learning of language knowledge and the cultivation of language skills, with the emphasis on both the form and the content of a language. In teaching practice, its all-inclusive nature requires English teachers to select special and effective teaching methods in conformity with its special tasks to avoid turning it into a pure practical course of oral English or a pure theoretical one on grammar.

1. Analysis on Advantages and Disadvantages of the Grammar-Translation Method in Practical Teaching

The grammar-translation method is a traditional method for foreign language teaching prosperous in western European countries in the 18th and 19th centuries in which the target language is translated into the mother tongue, that is, grammar teaching and translation exercises are mainly relied on to teach a foreign language. Its core lie in that when learning a foreign language, its grammatical rule system should be learned and memorized and used when translating literature works and sentences from the target language to the mother tongue.

In the period from 1980s to early 1990s, with the strong educational function of China's foreign language teaching, government expected the mastery of language knowledge and people commonly regarded a foreign language as static language knowledge. With such an overwhelming educational idea, the grammar-translation method was undoubtedly viewed as the only way of foreign language teaching. At comprehensive English class, teachers took grammar as the basis and translation as the basic method for their teaching and translation and students' ability in reading foreign sample articles and imitating them to write their own ones as the purpose. We have to admit that this method had a lot of advantages when it was proposed. For example, translation helps students to profoundly understand abstract meaning of foreign words and complex sentence structures; systematic grammatical knowledge develops students' clear grammatical concepts, exact understanding of words and translation capacity; extensive reading and recitation of original works cultivate students' reading and writing abilities.

When it comes to late 1990s especially the 21st century, due to the deepened contact between China and the world, government's educational idea has been changed a lot. Foreign language teaching is inclined to be instrumentality-oriented teaching and people have paid increasing attention to the practical use of language learning or the improvement of communicative ability. Students taught with the grammar-translation method have displayed some problems, such as emphasizing written language only while lacking in oral expressive ability or even suffering from long-term deafmutism to a foreign language, developing the habit of relying too much on translating everything into the mother language hence influencing their ability of communicating in a foreign language.

2. Analysis on Advantages and Disadvantages of the Communicative Teaching Method in Practical teaching

The communicative teaching method, established in the countries of Western European Community in early 1970s, is based on inter-disciplines involving modern sociological linguistics, sociological psychology, psychological linguistics and applied linguistics. Its core lies in teaching, learning as well as using language as a communicative tool instead of teaching students a set of grammatical rules and fragmentary word uses. With an emphasis on the central role of students as well as the practicability of language, this method enables students to practice language, have more language practice and better communicative ability in a variety of activities.

Taking in consideration some problems of the traditional teaching method in teaching practice, the educational world has started to pay attention to the reform of teaching methods with the aim of “teaching serves practice”. In this atmosphere has the communicative teaching method prospered in China. This method has apparent advantages, such as emphasizing the cultivation of students’ abilities and skills to use language, emphasizing students’ initiative and application of what they have learnt to practice, encouraging thinking in English instead of Chinese, therefore enjoying popular recognition and support in the current educational world. However, something happening recently has raised a question for me: Has the application of the communicative teaching method helped us to find a widely applicable and all-effective master key? According to what a representative for the English subject said at a recent teaching feedback meeting, students were bored with English due to the former teacher’ explanation of vocabulary and grammar and they have got greater courage, wider horizon and improved interest in English after given more opportunities to communicate with others in the new teacher’s class; however, they feel that they have failed to really grasp a necessary number of language points and therefore their output has been influenced by their insufficient input both in quantity and quality; as a result, despite their enthusiastic speeches their communication has nothing to rely on, just like water without a source or a tree without roots.

I have realized from this instance that students’ confusion and demands for basic language knowledge shouldn’t be neglected. After all, “to dare to speak” is different from “to speak well”. We cannot replace the former deaf-mute English with illiterate English.

3. Establishing Comprehensive English Teaching Pattern with a Combination of the Communicative Teaching Method and the Grammar-Translation Method

Regardless of all criticism it has received, the grammar-translation method has been an indispensable method in English teaching as well as a necessary step in the cultivation of students’ communicative ability in a non-English environment. A person cannot have successful communication before having a correct mastery of language rules. Although the applicability of the communicative method has been widely accepted, this method is still confronted with some practical problems brought about by different language systems, learning habits and logic between East and West. As a result, it cannot be effectively applied and conducted immediately and fully at the moment. Accordingly, I think we should search for a fusion between the traditional teaching method and the modern teaching method with a more dialectic attitude based on the learner’s practical ability and request, that is, adopting a new method fusing the two methods together in one class of comprehensive English.

By taking advantage of their complementary advantages, we can form a new idea and method suitable for Chinese people’s teaching of English.

4. Fusion of the Two Methods in Practical Teaching

4.1 Their Fusion in Different Learning Stages

As to the newcomer at college, most have no strong communicative ability in English and are accustomed to accepting knowledge passively from the teacher due to the influence of exam-oriented education despite of their systematic English learning in senior high school. When taught with a pure communicative method, they might feel at a loss and then frustrated or even bored with English learning. Therefore, it may be better to have the grammar-translation method as the major method and the communicative method as an aid when teaching these freshmen or sophomores in order to provide them with a solid basis which will lead to communicative training in senior grades.

The ultimate goal of language learning and training still lies in achieving effective communication and fulfilling specific tasks with language as a communicative tool.

With students’ necessary preparation in middle and low grades, teachers are expected to offer students in senior grades with opportunities of practical communicative training in order to help and guide them to achieve the pre-set goal. At this stage, the communicative method should take the dominance while the grammar-translation method plays a complementary role.

4.2 Fusion in Different Skills

Comprehensive English emphasizes students’ comprehensive training in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. Due to the specialty of listening and speaking training, they are usually dealt with separately while other three skills are mainly trained through the learning of texts.

As for listening and speaking, students are expected to follow classes given in English, to understand short conversations, lectures as well as reports with familiar topics, simple structure and a speed of 120 words per minute, to ask and answer and retell based on relevant listening material, to make conferred presentations based on familiar topics after adequate preparation. Obviously, the communicative method helps to achieve the teaching goal in listening and speaking practice. In practice, teachers may ask students to listen to tapes, do exercises and have discussions based on hot issues with teachers’ checking and instruction; they may also analyze some difficult points in listening material and have more extensive learning of new words and expressions. However, those who have been accustomed to the traditional method tend to keep silent and think little of this method since they cannot learn sufficient knowledge and language points. As a result, teachers should use the grammar-translation method at times with the communicative method as the main line. For instance, some difficult points at the linguistic level can be explained with the traditional method.

Students' reading, writing and translation skills are mainly trained in learning texts. Teachers are expected to base their teaching on texts to give students certain information and language knowledge first of all by focusing on the translation and understanding of texts and then establish new situations beyond the texts for practice of communicative skills. I once adopted a four-step method including preparatory reading, listening and answering, communication on text and conferred communication in the text teaching process, achieving a natural transition and fusion of grammar-translation training and communicative training. In the first step, students are required to preview a text beforehand with their grammar-translation experience in which they can make sure about some new words, the gist of the text and some questions and therefore have the next day's class with full preparation. In the second step, the teacher first asks students to correct their pronunciation and intonation by imitating the tape and then plays the tape once again for students to answer questions or make judgments so as to check their preparatory reading. In the third step, the teacher may guide students to have communication in the context related to the text and help them to solve some problems in key words, sentences and understanding of content they displayed in the previous two steps. When explaining key words and sentences, the grammar-translation method should be used to deepen students' understanding of the text and improve their ability to use language correctly and flexibly through right communication on the text. In the last step, students' enthusiasm for communication is fully encouraged. Here the communication in this step is different from that in the previous steps since teachers need to employ a variety of advanced teaching methods to create language situations and communicative tasks which originating from text while going beyond of it. Students are able to apply what they have learnt to real communication through continuing writing texts, having simulated dialogues, having role-plays, having discussions and so on, hence achieving the purpose of communicating ideas through language.

4.3 Adopting the Communicative Teaching Method in Grammar Teaching

In comprehensive English, grammar teaching isn't intended for studying grammar but help students to grasp language rules and fulfill listening, speaking, reading and writing practice in a better way. As a result, teachers should create situations for real activities according to students' daily life to guide students to understand, grasp and use grammar correctly in such situations. I once adopted a four-step method including introduction, imitation, summary and application to promote grammar teaching at comprehensive English class. In the introduction section, the teacher gives oral demonstration on some original or relevant sentences related to a certain grammar rule in order to introduce it. Selected examples should be in conformity with certain communicative situations hence putting it across to students to what situations this grammar rule applies. In the imitation process, students are required to have oral imitation of some expressions fit for the given situation after understanding examples, which further establishes a pattern for correct use of grammar knowledge in a new situation as well as checks whether they have understood the given knowledge points or not. In the summary part, students are guided to sum up grammatical rules and points by analyzing specific situations themselves so that they will enjoy the joy of success. Students are expected to take notes so as to accumulate material for review. In the last step, some real situations are set to help students to practice using the learnt grammatical knowledge to have communication. Once they find that they can apply grammar to real communication and specific tasks instead of memorizing mere grammatical rules, students' learning enthusiasm will be stimulated and their ability of independent analysis and solving problems will be cultivated as well.

To sum up, although it is the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching to fully achieve communicative teaching, we are still undergoing an indispensable stage involving the fusion of the grammar-translation method and the communicative method. As the practitioner of English teaching, we should combine the two to serve the purpose of English teaching based on the features of comprehensive English as well as the actual needs of non-English majors.

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