Analysis and Comparison of Two Innovations

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is different from the traditional language syllabus, which is on the basis of the rationale that the goal of language teaching is to “use” the target language rather than to learn the “usage” of discrete grammatical structures. This paper expounds on the innovation from traditional teaching to CLT as well as the personalized technology of large-class teaching from the seven aspects of Who, Adopts, What, Where, When, Why, and How. The author compares and analyzes the two and concludes that the first case illustrates the importance of the CLT, but it is difficult to carry out due to a series of obstacles such as large-class teaching. Although the researcher in the second case accepted the poor situation and found a series of appropriate CLT skills that could be implemented in large-class teaching and achieved good results, the skills are not true of all large-class teaching. Therefore, curriculum innovation is an inevitable result of educational development, a reform to solve a specific problem involved, and needs to be adjusted according to different backgrounds.

Keywords

Curriculum innovation, traditional teaching, CLT, teacher and learner roles

1. Introduction

Curriculum innovation is as long as the history of education, in the process of its development, a good number of definitions of curriculum and innovation appear. According to Allen (1984, p. 61), the curriculum involves consideration of a series of complicated factors (philosophy, society, administration) which are related to educational program arrangement. It consists of both teachers’ objectives and choices of content and method as well as pupils’ objectives, beliefs, and values. While communication is the connection between teachers and students to form the classroom’s social order (Barnes, 1976, pp. 187-188). Innovation is a new and deliberate opinion, goal, or practice that aims to promote desired objectives (Nicholls,1984, p. 4, cited by Markee, 2001, p. 120). It is a political change by experience or research in the process of language learning or teaching to improve language learning (Sergeant, 2001, p. 242, citing Delano et al., 1994).

By combining the definitions above, curriculum innovation is a new thought or informed change which is suitable for both teachers’ and pupils’ objectives and intended to enhance language learning and teaching through individuals’ experiences or findings with the development of a society. It is not only a problem inside education, but also related to the development and progress of a society. In addition, it can renovate education as well as bring great changes to knowledge framework, educational conception, teaching methodology, classroom mode, and school construction. Therefore, it is important to study and find out an appropriate innovation. This essay aims to compare and analyze two curriculum innovations: innovation from traditional teaching to Communicative Language Teaching and individualization techniques in large classroom teaching.
2. Innovation from traditional teaching to Communicative Language Teaching

2.1 Who

In this innovation, the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) first published a syllabus about Communicative Language Teaching in Chinese higher professional colleges and distributed it to the local ministry of education throughout China, further to each Chinese higher professional college. After that, presidents of the professional colleges assigned the task of implementing CLT in the classroom to the deans or the heads of English Departments. Finally, the teachers were required to design their teaching materials and classes to use CLT in class. Thus, it is obvious that SEDC, the ministry of education, presidents, deans, and directors of the English Department are all adopters, teachers are both suppliers as well as implementers, and students are clients.

2.2 Adopters

It was in the late 1970s that CLT was introduced in China. Since then, a good number of Chinese famous linguistic experts began to study the CLT theory. However, up to now, some questions about CLT have not been solved yet. In that case, some linguists expressed their suspicion of CLT. Gui suggested that CLT could not be used in universities because it was lack of connotation (Cited by Bao, 2004). While Zhang pointed out that it was not suitable for elementary school students to develop communicative ability (Cited by Bao, 2004). Nevertheless, more and more joint ventures appear in large and medium-sized cities since China’s WTO accession. They require that interviewees have abilities to communicate with foreigners. Thus, students from higher professional colleges who are oriented to employment should be adaptable to the need. Therefore, in 2000, the syllabus about Communicative Language Teaching designed for Chinese higher professional colleges appeared. Chinese professional colleges began to attempt to implement CLT.

2.3 What

In China, the previous dominant traditional teacher-centered teaching method just focuses on grammar teaching and text explanation. In contrast, Communicative Language Teaching is a learner-centered approach in second and foreign language teaching which concentrates on interaction and aims to improve the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), as well as to promote communicative competence (Summaira et al., 2015), which refers to the proficiency in conveying meaning, and combining rules of linguistics with those of sociolinguistics in communication (Savignon, 1983). Namely, it is the combination of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, contextual competence, and strategic competence. Thus, it is evident that it is the anticipant objective of both language teachers and learners.

2.4 Where

As I mentioned above, innovation occurred in higher professional colleges across China. Higher professional colleges in China are similar to TAFE in Australia. The common goal of the colleges is to cultivate blue-collar workers. Learners study just for seeking a relevant job soon. In this case, the students must grasp some communicative skills in English, particularly for students majoring in Business English and Tourism English.

2.5 When

Li (2001) proposed in his work that the research on CLT in China may fall into three periods: the late 1970s to the middle of the 1980s (introduction of communicative theory), the middle of 1980s to early 1990s (acceptance and implementation of communicative theory), and 1990s to present (discussion and comment on communicative theory). As for higher professional colleges, it was about in 2000 the early adopters began to implement CLT. The late majority started in 2004. Laggards did not try to use it until 2008.

2.6 Why

Implementation of CLT in Chinese higher professional colleges is because of a variety of issues such as focusing on the traditional teaching approach and paying more attention to grammar and vocabulary. As is known to all, the traditional teaching method resulted in an unsatisfactory outcome because it just gave priority to basic knowledge such as vocabulary, sentence structure as well as grammar. In this way, most professional college students are good at sentence structure and grammar but poor at communicating with others in English. Thus, it was necessary to change the status quo.
2.7 How

Although CLT was cared about from the beginning, it encountered resistance from students and teachers in higher professional colleges because of its new mode. Most teachers attempted to use it in class and give up the traditional teaching method, but their efforts ended up failing due to the Chinese higher professional colleges’ current situation.

The author once made a questionnaire to ten medium English teachers from her college (Heilongjiang Polytechnic), located in Harbin, China in June 2021. The result is the following:

Teachers in Chinese professional colleges suffer from a great number of constraints when implementing CLT in the classroom: First, there are too many large classes, which brings about problems in effectively communicating in the classroom. Moreover, some students are too traditional to show their competence in public though they have adequate relevant knowledge. Third, some students are short of enough skills to speak fluently in English. Furthermore, many students do not know the importance of abilities to use English in the real world due to the traditional examination-oriented educational system. Fifth, teachers in China have to teach according to prescribed textbooks, which include more grammar exercises instead of communicative materials. In addition, many students suppose that perhaps they will not meet any person from foreign countries in their life, therefore English is not so useful to them.

As a result, currently, CLT is not popular in Chinese higher vocational colleges though most teachers believe it is a favorable method. Teachers can’t employ the CLT approach in Chinese higher professional colleges due to their current situation.

3. Change between teacher and learner roles (Individualization techniques for large classes) (Sarwar, cited by Hall & Hewing, 2001)

3.1 Who

In this innovation, the researcher organized a large class including 104 volunteers to conduct his study on solving teaching problems in large classes. Therefore, it is not difficult to identify that the researcher is not only the adopter and implementer but the supplier of the curriculum innovation, while the learners are clients.

3.2 Adopts

The research is an assumption method based on a lot of studies. The author designed the method for solving problems in some developing countries and then carried it out in a voluntary large class to demonstrate that it was an effective and useful approach. Therefore, it is considered to be adopted by readers or other researchers later.

3.3 What

Individualization involves “such seemingly diverse topics as one-to-one teaching, home study, individualized instruction, self-access facilities, self-directed learning, and autonomy because they all focus on the learner as an individual” (Geddes & Sturtridge, 1982, cited by Sarwar). Logan pointed out some underlying assumptions in 1980 (cited by Sarwar): learning ways vary from person to person; learning materials vary from person to person; a teacher is more of a facilitator than a preacher; different learning activities can occur at one time; learners have different learning motivations.

In addition, Altman (1980, cited by Sarwar) put forward three fundamental principles on individualized language teaching: a syllabus that caters to learners’ requirements, levels, and interests; individual objectives, ways, and desires; teaching approaches suitable for learners’ needs. These assumptions and principles can be used as a criterion to examine research on curriculum.

The three Rs (Reeducation, Responsibility, and Relevance) of individualization were claimed by Altman at first (Williams & Williams, 1979, cited by Sarwar). However, according to the context of Zakia, there should be four Rs: reeducation [reconstructing the roles of teachers (facilitators) and the learners (active actors)]; responsibility (learners must be responsible for their learning); relevance (materials relevant to learners are needed); rapport (a beneficial atmosphere can be constructed through appropriate rapport in large classes).

Therefore, it can be concluded from the interpretations above that the innovation Sarwar studied is a change from traditional dependent learning to independent learning by implementing individualization techniques in large classes.

3.4 Where

The research is an assumption for solving problems (‘large classes’, ‘the dependent learner’, ‘lack of exposure to real-world English’) in some developing countries, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Senegal. In addition, some
other countries like Japan are facing the same problem.

3.5 When

From 1983 to 1985, Zakia designed academic research (Teaching English as a Foreign Language with Limited Resources) for his master’s degree at Sydney University (Sarwar 1983-85, cited by Sarwar). He planned a series of courses (voluntary, non-credit) that concentrated on reading and writing competence. The learners were 104 young female volunteers, most of whom were middle-school students. The course lasted about eight and a half weeks (two hours three days a week). It is expected to be implemented diffusely later.

3.6 Why

The research was conducted to resolve problems (self-conscious, nervous, uncomfortable, difficult to teach and manage, and impossible to correct homework) faced by teachers whose first languages are not English of large classes (more than 100) listed by Coleman (1989, cited by Sarwar). Zakia thought that such countries as Pakistan couldn’t reduce large classes soon. Therefore, it is necessary to find out feasible solutions in terms of the current situation. He is intended to get rid of the psychological obstacle that the communicative teaching method only can be used in small classes of teachers by the research.

3.7 How

The researcher applied the four Rs into practice (Sarwar, cited by Hall & Hewing, 2001):

* Individualization in large classes

This part can be divided into six activities: voluntary learning (telling the learners that the purpose of the course was fluency instead of accuracy and teaching skills instead of named textbooks), background questionnaire (giving the volunteers an hour-long questionnaire to know about their background, needs, attitudes and levels so as that the researcher could get to know the learners), grouping (forming permanent groups with two or three friends to share group activities both inside and outside the classroom), name tags (writing their name and group number on a card and wearing it in order that the teacher could call them by their first name to create a matey atmosphere as well as make them be acquainted with each other), profile cards (making profile cards with their photos and detailed information after discussing what were worth learning about and rewarded three attractive cards to make the writer be familiar with the learners and know more about their desire, advantages and disadvantages) and lending library (collecting old, simple story books, magazines and newspapers to distribute to the groups and then exchanging one another to improve their extensive reading).

* Individualizing learning tasks

This section consists of three aspects: radio news (giving a listening log sheet to the student for recording the local radio news to create a real-world situation and enhance their knowledge), self-created cloze (asking the learners to create and finish cloze according to the named textbooks and then check to improve their scores and confidence as well as abilities to proofread their work), and group projects (stimulating students to describe picture stories, make reading cards with questions on the other side, organize scenes and songs).

Using these activities, the three major problems (large classes, dependent learning, and lack of real-world situations) were solved. They made it easier for the teacher to manage the class. At the same time, learners became more and more responsible, confident, and positive in achieving their objectives.

3.8 Comparison and analysis

In comparison, the two curriculum innovations have similar contexts: large classes in developing countries. However, in the former curriculum, the large class was a big problem to restrict using communicative language teaching skills in the classroom. Teachers had to make compromises to use traditional teacher-centered teaching approaches to explain grammar and text. While in the latter innovation, the researcher accepted the current poor situation and found a series of proper communicative language teaching skills which could be implemented in large classes and obtained favorable results. In a sense, the latter is a necessary instruction and complementarity to the former.

Nevertheless, the clients of the two innovations are different. The former was conducted on higher professional college students whose ages vary from 20 to 24, while the latter was carried out on middle-school students whose ages are from 16 to 20. Thus, not all the means suitable for middle-class students can be employed in professional colleges. For example, some college students will think that the teacher treats them as children if a teacher asks them to create their profile cards or encourages them with prizes. Moreover, some Chinese professional college students are not interested in learning English because they think maybe they will never meet a foreign friend in their life. In this case, they may
chat with each other in their mother tongue throughout the class if they are in the same group with their good friends. In addition, it cannot meet the needs of those professional college students who want to pass the “Practical English Test for Colleges” to get their diploma if the technique just aims to improve fluency instead of accuracy. Therefore, the individualization techniques cannot adapt to all the large classes.

Although individualization skills are not suitable for any context, to a large extent, exactly solve and mitigate some problems faced by teachers from many developing countries, such as a lack of communication in a large class, students’ silence in the classroom, learners’ dependence on teachers and no real-world situation. It is worth adopting both large classes and small classes and studying further.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, curriculum innovation is a necessary result of educational development. Each innovation is designed to solve a certain problem involved. From the comparison and analysis above, it can be concluded that innovation is not necessarily suitable for any context. It should be subject to dialectical analysis and adaption for a certain context.

References


