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Integrating Communicative Language Teaching and a Top-down Reading Approach in a Chinese Senior High School English Lesson

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Abstract

This article reports on an integrated reading-speaking task-based lesson designed for first-year students in a Chinese senior high school. Situated within a predominantly exam-oriented educational context, the pedagogical aim is to enhance learners' communicative competence—specifically in requesting and providing advice—while reinforcing essential reading skills, including skimming, scanning, and intensive reading. The instructional framework draws on principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and adopts a top-down approach to reading comprehension. The lesson sequence incorporates multiple communicative phases: a video-assisted lead-in, prediction tasks, intensive reading combined with role-playing, collaborative group problem-solving, and a structured class debate. Each activity is analysed with regard to its communicative properties and cognitive reading processes. Recent scholarly work on top-down processing and integrated reading instruction provides theoretical support for the pedagogical design. In conclusion, the article discusses salient implementation challenges and practical implications for effectively merging CLT and top-down reading strategies in exam-oriented EFL classrooms.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching; top-down reading; integrated skills; Chinese senior high school; textbook adaptation

1. Introduction

English teaching in Chinese senior high schools typically operates under strong exam pressure. Performance in the National College Entrance Examination often becomes the main indicator of success, encouraging a focus on grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking skills rather than communicative competence. At the same time, curriculum reform highlights the importance of using English for real-life communication and academic purposes (Duff, 2014; Thamarana, 2015).

The lesson analysed here was designed for a class of about 30 first-year senior high school students in China. Their first language is Mandarin and their English level is roughly equivalent to IELTS 4.0-5.0. The lesson belongs to a unit on adolescent-parent relationships and focuses on email texts in which teenagers seek advice about conflicts with their parents. These texts are taken from the prescribed materials, but their sequence and use have been adapted.

The lesson aims to improve reading skills while creating opportunities for meaningful spoken interaction, drawing on CLT and a top-down reading approach. The following sections outline the theoretical background, describe the

lesson context and design, analyse how CLT and top-down principles are implemented, and consider challenges and teacher learning.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching developed in response to structurally oriented approaches that concentrated on grammatical form. It broadens the view of language ability to include the capacity to use language appropriately and effectively in context, often referred to as communicative competence (Duff, 2014; Thamarana, 2015). CLT is best understood as a flexible set of practices rather than a single method (Harmer, 2003). Classroom work gives prominence to activities such as role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks that require learners to negotiate meaning and collaborate with peers (Liu, 2019; Oradee, 2012). Fluency is valued alongside accuracy, so students are encouraged to express ideas with reasonable freedom before detailed feedback is provided (Richards, 2006). Lessons thus become more learner-centred, with learners actively participating in classroom talk rather than supplying only short responses (Cai, 2009; Efrizal, 2012). Studies in various contexts report that CLT-oriented speaking activities can reduce shyness and anxiety, increase confidence, and improve oral performance (Efrizal, 2012; Mangaleswaran & Aziz, 2019). Group and pair work provide relatively low-pressure environments where learners feel more willing to take risks, which is particularly relevant in exam-oriented systems.

2.2 CLT in Reading Lessons

In CLT-oriented reading lessons, texts are not treated only as sources of language input or sets of items to be tested through comprehension questions. Instead, texts become starting points for discussion, role-play, problem-solving, and personal response (Djumabaeva, Babaeva, & Paluanova, 2021; Liu, 2019). Liu (2019) argues that intensive reading courses for English majors in China can be "innovated" by embedding communicative tasks that require learners to interpret, evaluate, and respond to texts in open-ended ways. Students predict content, analyse characters' decisions, compare alternative courses of action, and relate textual issues to their own experiences, which encourages negotiation of meaning and deeper processing. Djumabaeva et al. (2021) similarly highlight how integrating CLT principles into reading lessons can help transform reading from passive decoding into an interactive, meaning-focused process. Recent work on integrated reading approaches reports positive effects on reading self-efficacy and motivation when learners engage in varied, meaningful reading activities that connect texts to discussion and collaborative work (Jarssa, Bushisso, & Olamo, 2025).

2.3 Top-Down Reading Approach

The reading component of the lesson draws on a top-down model of reading. In top-down processing, readers start from background knowledge, expectations, and predictions and then confirm or revise these as they encounter more of the text (Goodman, 1970). Reading is viewed as an active, hypothesis-testing process that relies on both linguistic cues and prior experience. A top-down approach usually includes pre-reading tasks that activate schema and promote prediction, while-reading tasks that encourage readers to check and adjust their predictions, and post-reading tasks that invite evaluation or application to new situations (Suraprajit, 2019). Instruction stresses global meaning and coherence rather than only individual words and sentences. Recent research with secondary EFL learners shows that explicit instruction in top-down processing strategies can improve reading comprehension and engagement, as learners become more active in predicting, inferring, and confirming meaning (Abdul baqi & Apriani, 2024). These findings support the emphasis on prediction and global understanding in the reading cycle of the present lesson.

3. Lesson Context and Design

3.1 Lesson Design and Aims

The learners are first-year students at a general senior high school. They have studied English for roughly six years, mainly through textbooks and exam-oriented exercise books. Within this environment, the lesson aims to remain compatible with exam preparation while offering richer communicative opportunities. The thematic focus on adolescent-parent relationships is taken from the official textbook. The texts are email messages in which teenagers

describe conflicts with parents and seek advice, a genre relevant both to learners' lives and to common exam writing tasks.

The lesson aims to develop students' reading skills, particularly skimming, scanning, and intensive reading of email texts. It supports learners in identifying and retelling key information from problem-solution emails, including who is involved, what the problem is, and what advice is given. It also seeks to expand expressions for asking for and giving advice so that students can later write their own emails in similar situations, while encouraging them to exchange views on parent-child relationships and collaborate through pair and group work.

3.2 Lesson Procedure

The 45-minute lesson consists of six steps, integrating reading and speaking. It begins with a lead-in, where the teacher shows clips from Home with Kids to introduce conflicts between parents and children. Students identify the problems, discuss solutions, and relate personal experiences. Then, they skim an email from Rebecca, identifying the central problem and predicting advice from Cynthia, which sets up a top-down reading process.

In the intensive reading stage, students read Cynthia's reply, compare it with their predictions, and discuss its persuasiveness. Pairs then role-play an extended email exchange, keeping close to the original content. Two more emails, written by Simon and Laura, present different conflicts. In pairs, students summarize the problems and design advice, which they present on a poster with a brief explanation. In the final stage, groups share their advice, respond to classmates' questions, and participate in a brief class discussion to vote on the most persuasive proposal.

4. Integrating CLT and Top-Down Reading

4.1 Communicative Features of the Reading Sequence

Classroom talk is message-oriented, which is central to CLT (Richards, 2006). Students describe problems, express feelings about the characters, and compare these with their own situations.

Skimming and prediction engage learners actively with the text. Students draw on prior knowledge of family conflict and advice-giving to anticipate the content of Cynthia's reply, a typical top-down reading process (Goodman, 1970; Suraprajit, 2019). They are encouraged to see reading as forming and checking hypotheses rather than purely bottom-up decoding.

Intensive reading is combined with evaluation and role-play. Learners verify their predictions, then comment on the quality and practicality of Cynthia's advice. The role-play turns written input into spoken interaction and prompts learners to rephrase and extend ideas. Such text-based role-plays exemplify communicative activities associated with CLT and have been shown to encourage authentic interaction and speaking practice (Oradee, 2012). Meaning and interaction take precedence over detailed grammatical accuracy, reflecting CLT's emphasis on fluency and functional language use in reading lessons (Djumabaeva et al., 2021; Liu, 2019).

4.2 CLT-Oriented Speaking Tasks

The speaking-focused stages highlight CLT principles in a different way. In the group advice-writing stage, learners cooperate to decide what to say to Simon and Laura. This involves explaining reasons, evaluating alternatives, and negotiating compromise, all of which require communicative effort (Cai, 2009; Richards, 2006). The genre of advice, closely connected to learners' lives, contributes to the authenticity of the task.

Research suggests that CLT-based tasks can reduce anxiety and encourage oral participation, especially when learners work collaboratively (Efrizal, 2012; Mangaleswaran & Aziz, 2019). The group format offers a relatively safe environment in which learners can try out language before speaking in front of the whole class. During the mini-debate, learners move from small-group preparation to public argumentation, justifying their suggestions and responding to questions. Debate-type activities match CLT recommendations for problem-solving and opinion-exchange tasks (Richards, 2006; Oradee, 2012).

4.3 Top-Down Processes in the Reading Cycle

This sequence reflects the view of reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" in which readers continually test and revise hypotheses (Goodman, 1970). It also aligns with research showing that explicit use of top-down

processing strategies can enhance secondary students' reading comprehension and confidence (Abdul Baqi & Apriani, 2024). By integrating reading with speaking and collaborative problem-solving, the lesson also reflects findings from studies on integrated reading approaches, which report positive effects on reading self-efficacy and motivation when learners engage in varied, meaningful reading experiences (Jarssa et al., 2025).

5. Challenges and Pedagogical Tensions

The email topics in the lesson closely relate to students' lives, making it challenging for some to adopt a detached, multi-perspective view. In an exam-focused environment, some students and colleagues may view activities like video viewing, role-plays, and debates as less efficient than traditional exam-style tasks. This creates tension between communicative goals and short-term test preparation. To address this, it is important to highlight how the lesson supports exam-related skills, such as skimming, scanning, and intensive reading, which are similar to common exam tasks. Additionally, the lesson helps develop broader competences, including critical thinking and interactional skills, as required by modern curricula (Duff, 2014; Liu, 2019).

Group work and debates can also lead to unequal participation, with more confident students dominating the discussion. To address this, rotating roles and time limits for reporting can be used, though effective management of group work remains a challenge for teachers.

6. Teacher Reflection and Textbook Adaptation

The design and implementation of this lesson prompted a reconsideration of the role of the textbook. In the original sequence, three emails seeking advice appear in the reading section, while the reply email is presented mainly as listening material. In the lesson described here, both the problem emails and the reply are re-sequenced and integrated into a single reading – speaking lesson. This adaptation was motivated by the wish to create a coherent set of activities that builds from comprehension to interaction and debate. The change reflects a shift from treating the textbook as a fixed script to viewing it as a resource that can be reshaped to match local aims and learner needs, in line with the context-sensitive spirit of CLT (Duff, 2014; Harmer, 2003). Explaining the purpose of communicative tasks to students is also important, since understanding how these activities contribute to reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, and exam performance can increase their engagement.

7. Conclusion

This article has presented an integrated reading-speaking lesson for first-year senior high school students in China, designed within the frameworks of Communicative Language Teaching and a top-down reading approach. The lesson uses textbook-based emails about parent-child conflicts as core input and links them to activities including a video lead-in, prediction, intensive reading with role-play, group advice-writing, and a class debate.

The analysis suggests that CLT principles can be applied in reading lessons, with texts functioning as stimuli for interaction and problem-solving rather than solely as sources of right-or-wrong answers (Djumabaeva et al., 2021; Liu, 2019). The top-down reading cycle encourages prediction, hypothesis testing, and the integration of textual information with learners' own experiences, supported by research on top-down processing and integrated reading approaches in secondary EFL contexts (Abdul Baqi & Apriani, 2024; Jarssa et al., 2025). At the same time, the lesson illustrates typical challenges in exam-oriented EFL environments, including students' difficulty in adopting multiple perspectives and concerns about efficiency. Principled textbook adaptation, grounded in CLT and top-down reading principles, can help bridge the gap between test preparation and the broader goal of developing learners who can read, think, and communicate effectively in English.

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