

Chinese EMI University Students' Attitudes Towards the Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English Language Classes

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Abstract. With the rapid global growth of English usage, numerous institutions have been established in non-English speaking jurisdictions such as China to provide English medium instruction (EMI). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a language teaching methodology that emphasizes communicative functions, has increasingly been applied in English as foreign language (EFL) areas. Therefore, this research aims to investigate Chinese EMI university students' attitudes towards the effect of CLT implementation on English skills development, teachers' roles in CLT English classes, and factors influencing their study of English under the methodology of CLT. Through semi-structured interviews with five junior English major students at a Chinese EMI university located in southern China, this study reveals a generally positive attitude towards CLT. The participants believe that the implementation of CLT could enhance their English proficiency, particularly in listening and speaking skills. It is widely acknowledged that teachers play a crucial role as facilitators in CLT-based English classes. Additionally, this study reveals that both internal factors, such as increasing students' sense of participation in class, and external factors, including a communicative learning environment, cooperative learning activities, peer pressure, the social media publicizing ideas of English language learning and so on, all have positive effect on participants' English study.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching (CLT), English as medium instructions (EMI), English study.

1. Introduction

It has been witnessed that English as lingua franca is emphasized with more and more significance in the globalized society nowadays, resulting in copious EMI institutions emerging in EFL areas and countries. According to Dearden (2014), EMI could be defined as the utilization of the English language to deliver academic instructions in contexts where individuals' first language (L1) is not English [1]. Some research has shown that EMI environment could motivate students and enhance both their academic competency and English proficiency if English is properly utilized [2]. Nha (2017) stressed that appropriate teaching methodology is essential for implementing EMI courses successfully [3]. However, although development of English education has been seen in Asia, there has not been a breakout in English teaching approach in Asian context [4]. Most Asian countries tend to apply grammar-focused English teaching. Nevertheless, CLT is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the development of students' language proficiency through authentic communication in real-life situations, where information exchange occurs and language use is not entirely predictable [5]. Thus, the application of CLT in an Asian English classroom is difficult. However, the research conducted in China reveals students prefers the method of CLT in English learning [6]. Even though there are numerous studies investigating CLT implementation in China, not enough studies focus on Chinese EMI university students. CLT is a teaching method emphasizing language communicative use and its use has grown rapidly in China such as in Chinese EMI university. Besides, CLT is different from the traditional teaching methods focusing on grammar drills and rote memorization which are used in most Chinese institutions, and thus Chinese EMI university students' attitudes on CLT implementation in English language classes could have insights into CLT implementation in

this context. Therefore, this research investigates Chinese EMI university students' attitudes on CLT implementation in English language classes by interviewing 5 English major students from a Chinese EMI university located in southern China, which could give insightful implications for EFL teachers to better instruct students by carrying out CLT in English class.

2. Literature Review

According to Nha (2017), one of the reasons that EMI courses are not effective enough is lacking suitable teaching methods [3]. Although some Asian countries have stipulated conducting CLT in English class as an educational policy, CLT is still not that successful in Asian English classrooms because of a series of contextual elements [4]. In most Asian countries, English studies are form-focused and the main goal is passing the examination, and thus students' English communicative skills could hardly be improved. Savignon and Wang (2003) conducted the research of China Taiwan learners' attitudes on CLT by using questionnaires [6]. The participants were 174 year-one university students, consisting of 105 female students and 69 male students. The results show that Chinese Taiwanese university students hold positive attitudes towards CLT in English classes for that they enjoyed the encouraging atmosphere of CLT English courses and they supposed communication was the main goal of learning a second language [6]. The results also reveal that the amount of English learning experience has the positive correlation with the negative attitude on the form-focused English study [6]. Besides, through interviewing 8 teachers from two different universities, Chang and Goswami (2011) showed that students' willingness to participate in class, students' English proficiency, and the teaching hours all influence the effectiveness of CLT in their study [7]. Regarding CLT itself, it requires immersing English environment as well as proper measurement means [7]. Besides, Da Luz (2015) applied both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the relationship between teachers and students in CLT classroom [8]. The findings stress on teachers' role in implementing CLT in English class that teachers need to create a relaxing and trustful atmosphere so that students could be more motivated [8]. Similarly, Wu (2010) examined the correlation between students' language anxiety and learning strategy in CLT classroom by using questionnaires and proficiency test [9]. The research reveals that teachers have the obligation to make the learning environment less tense, resulting students' increasing confidence and motivation so that students will probably become more successful second language practitioners [9]. Furthermore, Rao (2002) pointed out that most Chinese English language learners suppose the combination of CLT and traditional teaching methods would be preferable. As a teaching methodology featuring communication and authentic situations, CLT is proved to have the function of motivating students especially when students are involved in class activities set in authentic situations [11]. Another feature of CLT is that the class is learner-centered and students are more motivated in this kind of learning atmosphere [5]. Besides, Richards (2006) also found out that students could acquire more vocabulary and grammatical patterns in CLT classes [5]. In the field of CLT, there were also researchers emphasizing the importance of students' learning needs. Horwitz (1988) indicated that the contradiction between learners' expectations and classroom reality could discourage students' learning motivation to a great extent and thus the learning achievement will be negatively influenced as well [12].

Through reviewing the literature related to CLT, the importance of conducting suitable teaching method in English education could be seen. Although the use of CLT is increasing in Asian context, the attitudes towards CLT implementation in English language classes is various because of the diverse curricula and teachers' different practical implementation of CLT in English language classes, which inspires the researcher to study more about Chinese EMI university students' attitudes on the effectiveness of CLT implementation on students' English skills development, teachers' role in CLT English class, and the factors affecting students' English study in CLT English class.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were applied in this study, to investigate the following three research questions: 1) How do Chinese EMI university students evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of CLT in English skills? 2) How do Chinese EMI university students evaluate teachers' role in CLT English language classes? 3) What are the factors influencing Chinese EMI university students' English study in CLT English language classes?

3.2. Participants

The participants are 5 junior students major in English, comprising 3 female students and 2 male students, from a Chinese EMI university located in a coastal city in southern China. The sampling is based on the strategy of typical sampling that the participants all have the coincident experience correlated with the research [13]. In this study, the participants all have the experience of learning English through CLT and they also understand its definition and characteristics in subject courses.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were carried out through the platform named Tencent meeting. The interview protocol provides a guide for the researcher that it comprises 15 interview questions. The questions pay close attention to participants' attitudes on CLT, and investigate comprehensive aspects of CLT implementation in English language classes such as its effect on English skills, motivation, classroom atmosphere, and their feelings of learning English through CLT. Additionally, the interview questions are all open-ended to ensure validity. The interviews were recorded and stored by the researcher's password-protected phone.

To analyze the data, the preliminary stage was to transcribe the audio recordings. The software named Xunfei firstly turned the audio recordings from voice to text and then the researcher proofread the transcriptions sentences by sentences. After finalizing the transcriptions, the researcher applied deductive data analysis that the content relevant with different research questions was selected and organized [13]. During the data analysis procedure, individually various prior learning background revealed in the interviews will be considered. The results within one research question will be classified as well. For example, for the research question one, CLT's effectiveness four English skills and motivation were listed as two distinct points.

4. Results

In this study, the findings indicate that CLT is predominantly employed during the advanced stage of primary school and in EMI courses at universities. Moreover, there are specific contexts where CLT is extensively utilized, such as in preparation for speaking and listening assessments. Additionally, CLT proves to be an effective methodology for demonstration classes as it fosters an active learning environment. Despite participants acknowledging the importance of communication as the primary goal of second language acquisition, they perceive a combination of CLT and traditional teaching methods to be more favorable within the prevailing form-focused examination-oriented Chinese English education curriculum. Furthermore, teachers should adjust the proportion of CLT used in class according to students' needs and different curricula.

4.1. The Effect of CLT Implementation on English Skills

Based on the interviews, the implementation of CLT has a mixed impact on the four English skills. Participants noted that CLT differs from traditional teaching methods targeting specific English skills, as it aims to improve overall language proficiency. Knowledge acquired through CLT tends to be retained for longer periods and understood more deeply.

Most participants hold a positive attitude towards the effect of CLT on students' speaking skills. Firstly, students have increased opportunities to practice speaking, which motivates their learning and encourages them to seek out more chances to speak. More opportunities also lead to greater error detection and correction through interaction with classmates, reinforcing knowledge points while learning new vocabulary and sentence patterns. However, some participants argue that engaging in speaking practice with teachers may prove to be a more efficient approach. Additionally, it is believed that CLT may not yield significant results if students do not receive adequate input. Consequently, the participants perceive CLT as being more suitable for reinforcing knowledge points and consider it an appropriate method for assessing students' mastery of knowledge. Given its learner-centered nature, CLT allows students ample time to engage in discussions with their peers, during which they might resort to using their L1. It is incumbent upon teachers to regulate the use of L1 in CLT classes since excessive reliance on L1 can impede progress in speaking skills enhancement. Furthermore, if teachers fail to intervene in student discussions, some learners may lose focus on the topic at hand. Teachers should also pay attention to errors made by students during communication as this represents a significant aspect.

Listening is considered fundamental to communication according to the participants, as interlocutors must listen and comprehend in order to communicate smoothly. While the impact of CLT on writing and reading skills may not be immediately apparent, brainstorming ideas for writing with classmates through discussion integrates writing with speaking, enabling students to learn from others and develop critical thinking abilities. Besides, texts could be better understood when students communicated with each other after reading it.

4.2. Teachers' Role in CLT English language classes

According to the participants' responses, teachers should act as facilitators by following students' discussion process and providing error correction. By adopting a learner-centered approach which is CLT, students can easily develop a sense of ownership, which in turn enhances their motivation and engagement in classroom activities. Consequently, students are like owners in a CLT classroom.

In terms of teachers' responsibilities within a CLT language class, one participant shared his experience of practicing grammar points while communicating with classmates. He suggested that teachers' error correction is valuable for managing grammar points. Compared with being corrected by classmates, students receive more accurate feedback when being corrected by teachers, and students also trust teachers more when their errors are being corrected. Besides, through the interviews, a participant demonstrated that she enjoyed communicating with her classmates but felt nervous when teachers interacted with her. She believed it is significant for teachers to create a relaxing learning atmosphere when conducting CLT. Moreover, the participants reveal that carrying out needs analysis before designing class is crucial because they observed that some introverted students were more adapted to being lectured by teachers rather than CLT English class.

The responses also highlighted aspects where teachers could improve their implementation of CLT, such as time management and clear instructions delivery. Moreover, teachers face challenges in effectively addressing all language errors made by students during discussions and consistently monitoring the use of their native language in communication.

4.3. Factors Affecting Students' English study in CLT English language classes

To address the third research question, participants' responses revealed a multitude of factors. The most salient factor was the learning environment at EMI universities, which provided ample opportunities and an encouraging atmosphere for students to engage in English communication with both peers and instructors. As a result, students gradually improved their English proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening skills. Most instructors at these institutions hail from English-speaking countries and employ CLT methodology that prioritizes fluency over accuracy. Additionally, CLT is utilized to develop other language competencies as well, allowing students to enhance their linguistic abilities comprehensively through extensive practice and increasing confidence.

Nevertheless, EFL students in EMI universities tend to encounter challenges during the initial stage. The participants indicate that they are currently able to shoulder a greater academic load compared to before, and their fear of making mistakes diminishes over time. Similarly, CLT typically necessitates students learning through group discussions. The participants highlight that this fosters the crucial skill of effective collaboration with peers. Consequently, they believe CLT not only benefits their English language acquisition but also enhances their social communicative abilities. Some participants express experiencing peer pressure when comparing themselves to more proficient classmates during communication, which motivates them to engage in more intensive speaking practice in order to attain a higher level of English proficiency. In a CLT classroom setting, topics are consistently provided and activities predominantly revolve around task-based learning approaches that prioritize learner-centeredness and authentic situations. Consequently, students are more likely to experience a sense of accomplishment, and social media platforms have also been shown to influence their attitudes towards CLT through the availability of online videos that encourage them to speak up and embrace mistakes.

5. Discussion

The results show that Chinese EMI university students in this study exhibit a basically positive attitude towards the implementation of CLT in English language classes. Among the four English skills, they perceive CLT as particularly beneficial for enhancing speaking and listening abilities due to its emphasis on communication with others. CLT is expected to foster motivation for English learning and increase students' participation in class. Analysis of participants' prior learning experiences, as revealed through interviews, suggests a potential relationship between their attitudes towards CLT and the institutional curriculum they have studied under. For instance, participants who previously needed to pass speaking and listening tests and received a lot of CLT English classes display the most favorable attitude towards CLT implementation and provide details of how it benefits their English learning, compared with those whose main goal is written examination.

According to the findings, several implications for practitioners of CLT can be inferred. Firstly, teachers should prioritize time management, particularly when employing CLT to teach new knowledge to students. For instance, teachers should meticulously plan their lessons and consider using a timer to regulate the duration of each class activity. Furthermore, CLT is more suitable for implementation during the reinforcement phase as it allows for better assessment of students' knowledge acquisition. Secondly, students' use of their L1 should only constitute a minor portion of classroom discourse. Teachers should closely monitor group discussions among students and assess their language usage patterns. If students excessively rely on their mother tongue or engage in irrelevant conversations unrelated to the topic at hand, teachers ought to provide guidance and encourage English-language discussions pertaining to the assigned task. Moreover, teachers ought to conduct a thorough needs analysis to explore students' wants, lacks, needs and feelings towards English classes. Based on the results of the needs analysis, CLT class activities should be designed in various forms. Some participants mentioned specific activities for the CLT classroom such as role-playing, debate, information gap and mingling. They opined that incorporating these small-scale activities in diverse formations appropriately can enhance student participation and motivation. Therefore, when designing CLT classrooms, teachers should use their creativity to combine textbook knowledge with innovative activities, and consider students' needs. Finally, it is crucial for teachers to introduce CLT at an early stage of students' learning so as to instill awareness about the importance of second language's communication function.

Considering the limitations of this study, the researcher conducted interviews with only 5 participants from a Chinese EMI university, thereby precluding any comparison of results with students from other Chinese EMI universities. Furthermore, while the findings suggest that CLT can serve as a means to assess students' knowledge management, there is no explicit indication of how to measure students' performance using CLT. Therefore, future research could focus on exploring the

attitudes of students across various Chinese EMI universities and investigating effective methodologies for utilizing CLT as an evaluative tool.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research findings reveal that the participants hold a basically positive attitude towards the implementation of CLT in English language classrooms. Moreover, CLT is believed to significantly benefit students' English skills, particularly their listening and speaking abilities. The learner-centered and interactive nature of CLT fosters students' greater engagement in class compared to traditional English classes. Additionally, teachers play a crucial role in implementing CLT by acting as facilitators who create a conducive learning environment, guide students in using the target language effectively, provide appropriate error correction, and deliver clear instructions at an optimal pace. They also need to design specific class activities according to students' needs. Considering the factors influencing students' English proficiency within CLT classrooms, it is imperative to ensure ample communicative opportunities are provided within an encouraging learning atmosphere. Additionally, CLT facilitates collaborative learning and enhances students' social skills. Social media platforms also motivate students to improve their English communication abilities through interactive language practice. Despite acknowledging the benefits of CLT on English proficiency and motivation, the participants still a blended teaching approach that combines both CLT and traditional methods. This preference may be influenced by their prior learning experiences in Chinese institutions where passing exams is the primary goal of studying English. Furthermore, teachers' practical implementation of CLT also significantly impacts participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of this teaching method. This research provides implications for EFL teachers on how to effectively implement CLT in English language classes to enhance students' English proficiency. To address the limitations of this study, future research could explore comparisons between different institutions and investigate how CLT can be used as a tool for assessing students' knowledge management.

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