

# A reflection of beliefs and practice on speaking class

Fei GAO

International Department of No.19 High School of Zhengzhou, Zhengzhou 450000, China

---

**Abstract:** The main purpose of English teaching is to communicate with others. Hence, speaking class is a process with the aim of improving students' communication ability. Communicative language learning (CLT) seeks to bring students beyond grammatical competence to a point, emphasizing interaction as the means and the ultimate goal of learning. This essay takes a deep reflection on my teaching beliefs and practice of speaking classes in a senior high school of China.

**Key words:** communicative language learning; speaking class; communicative competence; context

---

## 1 Introduction

Communicative language learning has been popular for years for amending perceived shortcomings with other approaches and methods. This approach, as Larsen-Freeman and Anderson states, aims to help language learners to communicate in target languages [7]. Therefore, students are expected to have both linguistic competence and communicative competence, such as figuring out the speakers' intention or expressing themselves. In my perspective, communicative language teaching contributes a lot to develop students' abilities in using language outside the classroom to solve real life problems. Being a communicative language teacher means the shift of my role from the center of the classroom to a facilitator and advisor in class, especially in class activities or tasks.

This essay, targeting my belief and practices, will focus on a specific aspect of my language teaching to senior high school students in speaking classes. I begin by describing my teaching context, then introduce my teaching instances and my pedagogical beliefs and finally I talk about my views on the teaching context.

## 2 Teaching context

For the past two and a half years, I have been working in an international department of a provincial senior high school. All of the students in this department are preparing to study abroad after their senior high school education. Compared with traditional senior schools in China, this department offers more compulsory English courses to improve students' language competence.

My speaking class is comprised of 7 females and 12 males, who intend to take IELTS exam by the end of the first semester of Grade 11. The results of mock exams show that their English level is B1 with some variations depending on individual students. The main teaching contents in the speaking class are topics that appear in the IELTS speaking test. Students are assessed through their class attendance, performance, post-class assignments and final oral exam. The classrooms are equipped with computers and Wi-Fi, which can be used by teachers and students holding tablets in hand .

However, it is inconvenient to move furniture in these quite small classrooms.

### **3 Teaching beliefs and instances**

I believe that "the classroom is the center of the educational experience" [4]. Therefore, almost everything that I have done is done with a pedagogical intention. My general teaching process is influenced by experienced teachers, which Crookes called "rules of thumb", hence I present the speaking topics and language ingredients first, then create activities to guide students to practice by using what we learnt and finally produce a paragraph orally or in writing according to the given question or topic, which is normally an after-class assignment .

Besides the general teaching process, I do have my own beliefs in teaching. In order to guide students to understand what the real conversation is like in IELTS speaking examination, each time before introducing a new topic, I share a clip of video to present how native candidates answer relevant questions. In this way, students can access to "authentic language" of a real exam context. Students can not only learn about language knowledge, like pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical structure, sentence structure and intonation, but also, as Hedge (2000) mentioned, know how to use language to achieve communicative goals [6]. However, though students were asked to watch videos, they sometimes could not give the right answer to achieve the examiners' intention. As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) said, having the ability to understand speaker's or writer's intentions is part of communicative competence. Therefore, in an attempt to cope with this situation, I ask students to try to find out keywords in questions as soon as they see them at first sight. I assume that only when they find out key words, can they select appropriate words and structure to organize their answers.

When they are familiar with a new topic, I will provide them with several useful expressions to support their answers. Students are expected to, but not limited to, use these expressions to organize answers. They are encouraged to use different linguistic forms to express themselves. In this respect, I agree with Larsen-Freeman (2011) when she explained Canadian teacher's teaching practice that "one function can have many different linguistic forms". Candidates are evaluated on their ability to communicate effectively, fluently, and accurately with the examiner in a coherent and consistent manner, not just on their language knowledge itself. In order to meet this requirement, students are expected to practice conversations in class.

Hedge (2000) suggested that "interaction in small groups provides a basis for language acquisition". Larsen-Freeman (2011) also agreed that by saying students need more opportunities to give their ideas and opinions. When students begin to practice their language and communication, my role has changed. During the stage of presenting knowledge, I am the center of the classroom; however, at the moment of practicing, students are expected to be more responsible for their language acquisition. Students are assigned in pairs to have a conversation, and one of them acts as an examiner to ask questions, while the other takes the candidate's role to give opinions. When they get engaged in the conversation, there is already an opinion gap lying in it. What's more, students have choices to determine what to say and how to say it. Usually, they are free to say whatever they want to express to make "real communication" happen. At the end of the communication, I will invite students to make sure whether their partners' immediate response and reply achieve their aims when they talk to each other. After that, I will invite them to give a score about their partners' performances. Willis recommended that students could be asked to "present a report on how they did the task and on what they decided or discovered" [3]. I agree with this because I find that students' language knowledge, communicative competence and the awareness towards speaking test rubrics are improved from peers' feedback.

In order to make their conversations going on smoothly, errors appearing in the conversation will be ignored if they do not influence negotiating meaning. Nunan cited Bruton and Samuda's finding that "learners are capable of correcting each other successfully" [2]. I find that some of my students will paraphrase partners' utterances if they cannot understand.

Sometimes if they have disputes, they will stop the conversation a little bit and try to find out the correct structure or form together. The teacher, as the facilitator and advisor, also needs to take the rule and responsibility in class to note the error first and then return to it later. After all, accuracy is an essential aspect of speaking exam evaluation.

#### **4 My awareness of context**

Bax critiqued that communicative language teaching neglects the context in which teaching takes place, and argued that the consequences of neglect are serious [1]. From his perspective, the learning context is fundamental to language teaching. Nevertheless Harmer argued that methodology is the first matter to consider in classrooms [5]. According to him, if the methodology is put back in second place, what teachers "believe in, and what they think they are doing as teachers" would be damaged. Later, Bax (2003) agreed that "teacher qualities are essential towards a good lesson" and replied that over-emphasizing methodology would brake teachers' abilities to analyze and respond to classes.

Bax (2003) also clarified himself that he attempted to combine context and methodology more productively. In this regard, I have the same opinion with him. As a language teacher, my responsibilities are not only to present key language ingredients or create activities to provide input and output opportunities for my students, but also to keep sensitive to students' reactions and engagement in my classroom. If students are not passionate about learning, I would instantaneously change my teaching way by creating more games to stimulate them. Meanwhile, I always give different assignments to different students according to their class performance, learning style and language competence. I believe that each student is an active individual and they have different learning styles and respond differently to different stimuli.

#### **5 Conclusion**

Lee's explanation of a student as "an active individual, not as a passive group member" immediately caught my attention when I first read it. In my past teaching practice, I rarely reflected on my teaching practices. I always thought that the practice of experienced teachers was the best and authorized approach. Typically, when I introduce key language points, students are just my listeners, not participators. I need more exploration on preparing my lessons ahead of time and creating more tasks to get students actively engaged in classes. This is an area that needs more thinking and improvement.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

#### **References**

- [1] Bax S. 2003, The end of CLT: a context approach to language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 57(3): 278-287.
- [2] Nunan D. 1991. Communicative tasks and the language curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(2): 279-295.
- [3] Ellis R. 2003. Chapter 8: The methodology of task-based teaching. *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [4] Hall G. 2017. Part 1: Classroom interaction and management. *Exploring English Language Teaching: Language in Action*. London: Routledge.
- [5] Harmer J. 2003. Popular culture, methods, and context. *ELT Journal*, 7(3): 288-294.
- [6] Hedge T. 2000. Chapter 2: The communicative classroom. *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Larsen-Freeman D, Anderson M. 2011. Chapter 9: Communicative language teaching. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.