

# A Methodological Model for Integrating CLT with GTM in OET

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## Abstract

How to improve non-English major college students' oral skills is an important and pressing topic for the reform of college ELT. Based on the analysis of the traditional teaching method and reflections on problems with current ELT in colleges, the paper attempts to explore a systematic methodological model for ELT, which reflects the reconciliation between CLT and GTM and stresses the dialectical unity of accuracy and fluency as well as form and meaning. The teaching objectives are achieved through a step-by-step progression from accuracy-oriented activities to fluency-oriented activities.

**Key words:** Approach to ELT, Methodological Model, Oral Skills, colleges

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s, English language teaching (ELT) has been listed as an essential component of compulsory education in colleges. The last few decades have witnessed a great progress in the theory and practice of ELT. However, the present English teaching is still unable to suit the needs of the development of college education. Over the past four decades, the most serious problem in ELT is that oral skills are neglected in colleges. Statistics show that a quite large number of non-English major college students can't express themselves in simple English after learning English for many years (Hu, 2002; Liu & Zhuo, 2003). And it is an undeniable fact that a great many of students are still learning "dumb English" in some colleges (Hu, 2002).

The phenomenon of "dumb English" has already aroused wide public attention. How to get rid of "dumb English" has become an urgent problem to educators and linguists. Considering the current English teaching situation, the State Ministry of Education published New College English Curriculum Criterion in 2007, which has been put into practice on a trial basis throughout the country. In contrast with the traditional syllabus, the new criterion emphasizes the cultivation of the students' comprehensive competence of using English as the paramount aim.

The release of English Curriculum Criterion heralds a new age in China's colleges English teaching. From then on, the issue of oral English teaching (OET) has been brought into focus. In some schools, for instance, oral English course has even entered the curriculum as a new subject. More importantly, oral English test has started its operation in some big cities as a new component of college entrance examination. As a result, more and more teachers of English nowadays are fully aware of the significance of OET and feel the pressing need to enhance the students' oral skills.

However, how to conduct the OET seems to be a knotty topic and a challenging task for most teachers of English. Recently there is a general debate over the issue of OET. In order to meet the requirements of the new syllabus, a more innovative instruction approach is being looked for. In this context, the author of this paper attempts to explore a methodological model for OET with the purpose of putting forward some innovative ideas for the reform of ELT in colleges.

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## **2. Some Reflections on Traditional Language Teaching Method and Content**

Before attempting to explore an approach for OET, it would seem useful to analyze the current status of ELT in colleges, diagnose the traditional teaching styles, and examine the main problems regarding to the traditional teaching model so that it will help us to decide on the choice of the teaching strategies and approaches.

### **• The Effect of Traditional Teaching and Its Major Problems**

“Just a couple of words suffice to generalize the teaching effect at the colleges: much input, poor output” (Zhang, 2002). Based on a state-sponsored national survey, Zhang (2002) gives an objective description of some problems of traditional English teaching in colleges as follows:

- “High grades, low ability.”
- Poor in communicative competence, such as listening and speaking abilities
- Lack of opportunity to use English for real-life communication
- Narrow knowledge coverage and weak language foundation
- Speaking skills are not given due attention and the importance of speaking is greatly underestimated.
- Students are generally most adept at reading while the remaining three lag far behind with speaking being the worst.

Much information is found concerning the situation and effect of English teaching in colleges. It can be concluded that traditional ELT is not much of a success, or at least, it has not fulfilled the objectives and goals set by the new English syllabus.

### **• A Comprehensive Analysis of the Problems with ELT in Colleges**

What accounts for the above-mentioned phenomenon? The explanation for this phenomenon involves many complicated factors. It attributes to system of education, teaching methods, teachers’ English level, educational facilities, textbooks, etc. This paper attempts a diagnostic analysis of the problems with ELT from a pedagogical perspective.

#### **○ Emphasizing the Teaching of Language Knowledge But Neglecting the Training of Students’ Communicative Competence**

It is true that **Grammar-Translation Method** (GTM) has been deep-rooted in the teaching practice in colleges. It emphasizes language form rather than function and meaning, accuracy rather than fluency, teacher’s central role rather than students’ initiative and autonomy. A typical traditional lesson is characterized by teacher-centered, textbook-centered and grammar-centered (Liu, 1995; Rao, 1996; Ting, 1999). For both the students and teachers, there is a keen interest in an exact understanding of every word, a low tolerance for ambiguity, and a focus on discrete grammar points and specific syntactical constructions. Little or no systematic attention is paid to speaking, or listening or the training of students’ communicative competence. Consequently, students have few opportunities to apply what they have learnt to practical communication.

#### **○ Emphasizing Reading, Writing and Listening but Neglecting Speaking**

No one can deny the fact that the current system of education is fully test-oriented, which is not aimed at improving students’ comprehensive ability, but only at developing their ability to perform well on the test. As a result, it has exerted a great negative influence on the ELT in colleges. Speaking is not given due attention just because oral skills are seldom tested in CET (College English Test Band 4 & Band 6). In some colleges, everything taught in the classroom goes towards the exams. Compared with other language skills, less classroom time is allocated to speaking in class. And nearly all the reference books and practice materials available to students are designed to cater to the needs and taste of stereotyped standardized exams. In order to get good grades in written examinations, teachers and students are immersed in the standardized tests, thus resulting in dumb English.

○ **Not enough attention given to the teaching of culture**

We must admit the indisputable fact that most teachers of English in colleges ignore the importance of culture teaching (Liu & Zhou, 2003). English teaching is often carried out from the angle of language knowledge. Some college teachers even have no ideas of cultural competence or no sense of cultural awareness. The integration of language teaching and foreign cultural information is often neglected.

As a matter of fact, language and culture are inseparable. On one hand, language is the carrier and container of culture. As a mirror of culture, language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture (Wang, 2000; Luo, 2002). On the other hand, cultural competence is also an integral part of communicative competence (Zhao, 2002). Chinese students often fail to understand accurately listening or reading materials in English not just because they have an imperfect mastery over the linguistic form of the language, but also because they are not familiar with the cultural background knowledge of the English speaking countries. In this sense, one cannot hope to have a good command of a target language without adequate knowledge of the culture related to that language.

○ **Teacher's Authority and Students' Passive Role**

Traditionally, most teachers have been quite used to such a way to teaching, in which the teacher is regarded as an authority who dominates the 45-minutes period and indulge himself in being the center of attention, trying to put everything into students' heads and paying scant notice of the feeling and the reaction of the students. The majority of classroom time is devoted to the teacher's lecture. Less or no time is given to the students to interact with the teacher and their classmates. In the traditional classroom, students tend to consider their teacher as the sole source of knowledge. They take no initiative in class and are reluctant to air their own opinions no matter whether they agree or disagree. It is not unusual for many students to keep silent throughout most of the course. Hence, to some extent, the traditional way of teaching frustrates students' initiative and restrains the development of their potentials and creativity.

● **A New Trend in ELT**

As mentioned above, oral English test has come into operation as a new component of college and postgraduate entrance examination and post. And the score of oral test has been taken into the total score of the exam. As the result of the emergent oral test, the issue of OET has been in the limelight. More and more teachers of English feel the urgent need to enhance the students' oral skills and more class time has been devoted to oral English instruction. Realizing that the traditional teaching method could not help much to develop the students' oral proficiency, some colleges began introducing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) into English teaching. In a communicative classroom, the teacher is more concerned with the learners, their feeling and ideas. The communicative activities are always learner-centered while the teacher works as a facilitator of his students' learning. He has many roles to fulfill, including a manager, advisor, and co-communicator. CLT attempts to follow the natural acquisition process in the classroom and believe that language learning comes about through using target language communicatively.

Since CLT was introduced into ELT in some key universities, more and more schools have realized its significance and have been trying to catch the new trend. However, after several years of practice, evidences have proved that the exploitation of CLT exclusively in Chinese schools has not brought about the expected results (Rao, 2002; Yang, 2003). On one hand, people have realized some possible pedagogical risks related to CLT. The most obvious risk is the fossilization of learners' errors. It avoids direct correction of speech errors and makes the teacher accept structurally erroneous utterances so as to encourage the use of communicative strategies (Shu & Chen, 1999). On the other hand, according to Hui (1997), CLT has met some other constraints in China by several existing factors as class size, students' preferred learning styles, the teachers' academic ability, culture, economy, and administration. It is a fact that most students don't like to participate in communicative-type activities and preferred more traditional classroom work. Moreover, many teachers also feel discouraged from continuing with CLT, both because of students' negative responses and because of their lack of training in using CTL and low English proficiency (Rao, 2002).

Therefore, due to its failures in practical teaching and the weaknesses of CLT, many English teachers have to resume the traditional or the so-called safe and convenient ways of teaching.

- **Its Implications for ELT**

From the empirical and pedagogical points of view, the paper has provided an analysis of the problems with ELT in colleges. However, what deserves to be mentioned is that it does not mean that the traditional approach or communicative approach is worthless and negated totally. As a matter of fact, each methodology reflects different features, each having its advantages and disadvantages. Neither of them can be judged as absolutely good or bad. For instance, when we teach the knowledge about the language (grammar, vocabulary and phonology), the traditional model is still useful. In this sense, change should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. What the language educators seek to do is to add value to tried and tested practice rather than subvert or reject them (Liu, 2004). In other words, the greatest challenge now is not to throw out well-established practice, but incorporate new ways of doing things into existing practice.

In order to improve the present situation in English teaching, this paper attempts to explore a new practical and systematic methodological model, that is “**Integrating CLT with GTM in OET**”. The model aims at enhancing students’ oral skill and assisting them in becoming more effective language learners.

### **3. A Teaching Model for Integrating CLT with GTM in OET**

- **Theoretical Foundation**

For centuries, efforts have been made to look for the best teaching method in foreign language teaching. Numerous methods evolved, but no one seems good enough to be universally accepted as the **BEST** (Shu & Chen, 1999; Zhang, 2002). As a matter of fact, many applied linguists and language teachers have realized that there is no such thing as “the best teaching method” (Prima Mallikamas, 2002). No single method can suit the various teaching objectives and address the needs of all students. Research has indicated that making exclusive use of either the CLT or the GTM does not suit English teaching in China today (Harvey, 1985; Ting, 1987; Forseth, 1991).

In order to overcome the disadvantages of the traditional teaching method and adapt the modern teaching method to the Chinese specific circumstance, a desirable solution is to reconcile the CLT with GTM and make flexible and eclectic use of the two approaches so as to get the benefit from both of them.

A suggested and desirable solution is to reconcile the different methods and get the benefit from all of them. According to Dennis Wilhoit, “the strong points of a variety of methodologies, if skillfully combined, can complement one another, together forming a cohesive, realistic, and highly motivational teaching strategy” (Dennis Wilhoit, 1994).

Due to the Chinese specific situation and the students’ preferred learning styles, GTM can not be overlooked and CTM should not be accepted blindly. A desirable solution is to combine the two teaching methods into one. That is to say, to integrate CLT with GTM in OET and get the benefit from both of them so as to acquire both grammatical accuracy and communicative proficiency. Recent studies indicate that most of the Chinese students favor a combination of communicative and non-communicative activities in their English classroom (Rao, 2002). And a combination of different yet suitable teaching approaches can achieve the best results (Dou Yan, 2002).

- **The Methodological Principles**

In reconciling CLT with GTM, we may find no available principles for the practical teaching. It is up to each individual teacher to decide on them according to the specific situation and his teaching objectives. Here are some suggested principles:

- **The Combination of Modernism and Traditionalism**

In order to overcome the disadvantages of the traditional teaching method and adapt the modern teaching method to the Chinese specific circumstance, the best solution is to combine modernism with

traditionalism. According to Rao (1996), “In reconciling the communicative approach and the traditional grammar translation, it is very important that we are not biased toward either of the two methods, but rather toward integrating the two into one.” Only by seeking a marriage between CLT and GTM in classroom activities can students be expected to develop their communicative skills as well as linguistic competence.

In doing so, the teacher should be flexible and adaptable to select among GTM and CLT, the teaching strategies and techniques appropriate to the middle-school students and the specific linguistic environment so as to improve their oral proficiency to the fullest extent possible.

- **Laying Equal Emphasis On Accuracy And Fluency**

Language communication involves effectiveness and efficiency of communication. Effectiveness depends on accuracy, while efficiency depends on fluency (Yang, 1990). According to Rao (1999), “There is no denying the fact that both accuracy and fluency are essential in language learning.” In ELT, not only are the students encouraged to make as few errors as possible, but they are expected to manipulate the language system as spontaneously and flexibly as possible (Rao, 1999). Therefore, fluency and accuracy should be integrated and equally emphasized in the processing of oral English teaching. As Peter Burgess (1994) puts it, “**Fluency + Accuracy = Communication**”

- **Different Focuses at Different Teaching Stages**

Form, meaning and function are three interactive dimensions of language, which should be taken into account in ELT. In the course of ELT, each stage should have a focus. From the elementary to the intermediate stage, the focus should be changed from that on forms to that on meanings and function, that is, from linguistic competence to communicative competence or from accuracy to fluency. According to the habit-formation theory, errors should be avoided and should be corrected at early stages because they have the danger of becoming bad linguistic habits and are likely to bring about the fossilization of errors ( Shu & Chen , 1999). Therefore, at the early stage of ELT, more accuracy-oriented activities should be adopted to train the students’ ability to use the language correctly. Secondly, after the students have mastered basic grammatical rules and linguistic structures, the focus should be shifted toward more fluency-oriented activities for the purpose of developing students’ ability to handle language interactions appropriately in real contexts. At this stage, errors should be tolerated, and the teacher should make it clear to students that error-making is not at all disgraceful but a natural and common practice.

- **Teaching Grammar as Meaning and Social Function**

Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching (Thornbury, 1999). Is grammar important or not important? Is it necessary to teach grammar or not? How should grammar be taught? Difference in attitude to the role of grammar and the way of teaching grammar underpin differences between methods, teachers and learners (Liu Mantang, 2002).

Grammar is important because it is the means through which linguistic creativity is ultimately achieved. It is beyond doubt that an inadequate knowledge of grammar would lead to serious limitation on the capacity for communication. The knowledge of grammar is the basis of communicative language. The question we should ask is not whether to teach grammar, but rather how to teach grammar so that grammar knowledge can be turned into grammar competence.

In traditional ELT classrooms in middle school, grammar is regarded as the core of language. Grammar rules are taught directly by the teacher and are practiced through translation exercises. Actually, knowing a large of grammatical rules cannot ensure that students can use them appropriately in real communicative situation (Shu & Chen, 1999). As Hymes (1972) notes, grammatical rules would be useless without rules of language use.

Grammar should be never taught for its own sake. Students need to learn how to use grammatical rules in actual communicative situations. According to Rao (1998), for most Chinese teachers of English, it is extremely important to integrate grammar pedagogy with the communicative components in these aspects: 1). teaching grammar as meaning. 2). teaching grammar as social function.

In this sense, the learning of grammar should be conducted in a functional way so that students may apply what they have learned to real social contexts. For example, when the teacher makes an analysis of the grammatical items, he should begin the teaching by providing a number of examples in context. Then he leads the class to repeat the structure in meaningful dialogues or engage the students in communicative drills. By doing so, he connects the mechanical learning of grammatical rules with meaningful learning. As a result, the teacher not only teaches the grammar, but also trains the students' language skills and their communicative competence as well.

○ **The Shifting of The Teacher's Roles in the Language Classroom**

According to Mei (2001), effective teachers actually are those who regard their students as the most crucial factor in the teaching-learning process and adapt their approach to the students and circumstances. In an integrated approach, teachers are supposed to have more responsibilities and roles to fulfill. As Xu (2002) points out, "different approaches stipulate different roles for the teacher." In this sense, teachers are expected to be actors and change their roles and tasks in different stages of OET (Yuan, 2002; Wang, 2000). It requires a lot of adaptability and flexibility on behalf of the teacher. The teacher's roles involve a controller, demonstrator, organizer, prompter, participant, and so on.

● **Teaching Procedures**

Under the methodological principles mentioned above, the paper attempts to put forward the normal teaching procedures for OET. They are not designed to be followed slavishly but intended to provide general guidelines. The teaching procedures are made up of three stages and three parts (presentation, form-focused activities, meaning-focused activities), and their relationship between different stages is concisely stated as follows:

The first stage is aimed primarily at giving the students comprehensible input about the language and help the students to become familiar with new language and background knowledge. It will be the teacher's job to show how the target language is formed by presenting new sentence patterns, introducing useful expressions, analyzing specific grammar points, teaching the rules of pronunciation, etc. In the presentation, the teacher should make use of students' existing linguistic knowledge to illustrate new linguistic items. Although this stage should be kept short, it is important in helping the students to assimilate linguistic and cultural points of the target language and in enabling them to produce the new language.

After the presentation of linguistic and cultural items, the second stage will be designed to provide the students with opportunities to perform some form-focused activities. Brown & Nation (1997) assert that "When learners first begin to speak in another language, their speaking will need to be based on some form-focused learning." Form-focused activities are often practiced in repetition drills or substitution drills. Each activity usually has a specific form or structure which will tend to be used repeatedly in that activity. With the help of the drills, students can master some useful expressions and consolidate the linguistic points, on the base of which more creative use of the target language can take place later. According to DeKeyser (1998), learners must assimilate and internalize declarative knowledge through ample practice before they can use it automatically in real communication. In this process, the students will be motivated not by a desire to reach a communicative objective, but by the need to reach the objective of accuracy. And the teacher may intervene slightly to guide, point out inaccuracies and give feedback.

The third stage focuses on communication output. As a follow-up to form-focused activities, meaning-focused activities are devised for the forms to be freely applied in communicative use. At this stage, the teacher should focus his attention on fostering students' ability to use the language fluently and productively in simulated situations or in the real social contexts. In meaning-focused activities, students are exposed to and given opportunities to practice and use meaning-focused communication, in which they must both produce and listen to meaningful oral communication (Brown & Nation, 1997). In addition, students usually have to solve a problem, seek information to fill a gap, and make a decision about what is appropriate to say and do. Activities in this stage include pair work, group discussion, games, teams debates, etc. This is the key

procedure to cultivate students' communicative competence, in which meaning and fluency are the primary goals of this stage. After students finish their tasks, the teacher should give feedback on their success.

#### 4. Conclusion

To integrate CLT with GTM in OET is to initiate a change in ELT for non-English major college students. There are no ready-made rituals to facilitate the work, but the undertaking is as adventurous as rewarding. Although its appropriateness and feasibility in Chinese context have been analyzed, it does not mean that this model should be taken as the only model that all teachers of English should follow. It only intends to bring some innovative ideas to the reform of ELT in colleges. Hopefully, more and more teachers of English will devote themselves to this study which will result in the refinement of OET in their own specific situation.

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