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Constructing a Philosophical Foundation of Language for Communicative English Teaching in China—A Philosophical Study on CECL Coursebook and Its Design

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Abstract

CECL coursebook, as an earliest and a representative coursebook for applying CLT in China, of which the first publication in 1987 has greatly advanced the studies and the research on specific aspects and procedures concerning communicative English teaching method. This study aims to construct a philosophical foundation of language for communicative English teaching by detailed examining the philosophical ideas underlying the design and the compilation of CECL coursebook. The essential philosophical unity between language and thought has been reflected in CECL through its substantial descriptive and explanatory dialogical tasks combined with cultural differences and individual variations. The innate quality of language as being open, dynamic and cyclic has been realized in CECL as its facilitation of the intersubjective dialogical connection and interaction between cultures and learners. And language vitality in its authentic use has been practiced through the meticulously designed time, place and relationship for each situation of communication in CECL teaching.

Keywords

CECL, CLT, philosophical study, language

1. Introduction

CECL (Communicative English for Chinese Learners), as an earliest and a representative coursebook for applying communicative English teaching method in China, was firstly designed and edited by the well-known applied linguist Professor Li Xiaoju, who, based on the prevalent way of English teaching and learning in China around 1980s, drew on the experience of the popular CLT (Munby, 1978; Widdowson, 1978, 1979, p. 56; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979, p. 24) in a number of universities from western countries. For about 40 years, CECL coursebook has been widely used and maintaining the improvement with its application in teaching practice combined with its two notable revisions in 2000 and 2015. The planning and designing of CECL have always been the focus of attention in the field of foreign language teaching since the coursebook was edited and used for the first time in Chinese universities. However, with more than 15 years of the experience in CECL teaching, the author of this paper recognizes that it has always been puzzling for the students and even for the most CECL teachers in the faculty about how to find a confident way to learn or to teach CECL. The issue is typically displayed in an uncompromising consultation between language accuracy and language

communication, with the former laying stress on language form, the latter on communicative strategies. This unsettled problem is mainly caused by, at least from the perspective of this paper, the improper handling of the relationship between the examination-oriented education value and the communicative approach in English teaching, together with the distinctive differences in the teaching circumstances between China and the English-speaking countries as the origin place of CLT. With many focused on CECL teaching in Chinese universities, the researches on communicative English teaching have never suspended among experts and scholars, but there are other meaningful issues for the improvement in practicing communicative English teaching for Chinese learners. For example, how is CECL class different from traditional English class in China? How is communicative English possible for Chinese learners? What will happen to English when it enters communication in the context of China? What is supposed to be an appropriate attitude towards English as a foreign language in CECL learning? What is the meaning of communicative language teaching? What is a language philosophical foundation of CLT in China?

2. Literature Review

Communicative approach in language teaching was being found fresh and new at its initial importation into China. Hence the incessancy of the research has been carried on this new way of learning for so many years. The concerned studies include not only a basic introduction and recommendation of CLT theories (Wen Houyi, 1998; Wang Zhu, 1998; Li Ying, 1999; Wang Yuying, 2002; Wang Linhai, 2007), but also a more thoughtful and heuristic review on its application into English teaching practice in higher education in China (Sui Mingcai & Wei Liming, 1998; Li Ying & Wu Changyong, 1998; Han Caiying, 1999; Wu Heping, 1999; Ma Jishan, 2002; Liu Naimei & Zhang Sheru, 2003; Yang Xiaojuan, 2004; Wan Yan, 2004; Pei Yaoshi, 2004; Zhang Yina, 2006; Sun Ming, 2007; Zhu Feng, 2009; Wen Qiufang, 2019), in which a parallel comparison between the traditional Chinese way of English teaching and the communicative approach of English teaching has been drawn, as well as a chronological retrospection on the inheritance and development in English teaching methodologies in China has been concretely outlined. At the same time, most scholars have sketched their comments and views on this new approach either positively or negatively, among which an indication of CLT applicability and localization in China has also been demonstrated in their discussions (Sui Mingcai & Wei Liming, 1998; Li Ying & Wu Changyong, 1998; An Caiying, 1999; Wu Heping, 1999; Pei Yaoshi, 2004; Sun Ming, 2007; Zhu Feng, 2009).

The first publication of CECL coursebook in 1987 has greatly advanced the studies and the research on specific aspects and procedures concerning communicative English teaching method. With the idea of “communicative competence” proposed by Hymes (1972), the discussion on improving communicative skills and strategies has become the focus in the research on communicative English teaching for a period (Ruan Yihui, 2000; Wang Jinan, 2008; Yu Xia & Liu Chengyu, 2019). For example, based on the major western theories of communicative competence, Ruan Yihui offers a detailed explanation for Professor Li Xiaoju’s interpretation of the meaning of communicative competence with its three dimensions embodied in CECL coursebook (2000), which has enriched the theory of communicative English teaching in China. Besides it, more inspiring ideas as “Whole Person Education” (Li Xiaoju, 1984; He Anping & Li Hua, 2012; Li hua & He Anping, 2012; Wen Xu & Xia Yun, 2014; Wen Xu, 2016; Yang Tian & Wen Xu, 2017; Wen Xu, Wen Weiping, & Hu Qiang, 2020), cross-cultural communication (Han Hong, 2002; Wei Ling, 2012; Ma Hong, 2018; Wang Weiqiang, 2018; Zhang Cuiling & Wang Qiang, 2019; Wu Feng, 2020), learner-centered language teaching (Li Xiaoju, 1984; Sui Mingcai, 1998; Niu Runying, 1998), task-based language teaching (Crookes, 1986; Xie Jiangwei, 2001; Zhang Siwu & Yu Haiyan, 2009; Wei Huiliang & Xie Yuanhua, 2014; Ellis, 2017, pp. 108-110; Lambert, 2019, p. 3; Xie Yuanhua & Chen Qiuli, 2019) implicated in CECL textbooks’ designing and planning are all popular issues for teachers and scholars.

All the studies embroidered on communicative approach as being triggered by CECL coursebook’s publication and application have made great contributions to an enrichment and a further development for CLT in China. Nevertheless, by its meeting and collision with traditional Chinese idea of English teaching (Ouyang Huhua, 2015), the establishment of CLT for English teaching in Chinese universities has aroused controversies about a remarkable conflicting relationship between language form and communicative content, or, language accuracy and language communicativeness (Li Ying & Wu Changyong, 1998; Dong Yanping, 2001; Sun Ming, 2007; Cai Zhiyu, 2008; Long Ting & Gong Yun, 2008). Some scholars have given a detailed analysis on the handling of the relationship by an on-the-spot investigation of CECL class teaching (Li Ying & Wu Changyong, 1998; Cai Zhiyu, 2008), while most scholars have been attempting to supply different ways to balance the two sides. However, this controversial issue has never been fully settled for it would find its root with a historical negotiation between the view of language as a tool and the view of language for its use. Besides, the trouble is closely related to the dominant mode of examination-oriented education in China over a long

period.

As far as this paper is concerned, the dilemma confronted with communicative approach for English teaching in China must be dealt with a macroscopic correlated perspective, which means a more overall view and belief about language, language learning and language teaching should be grasped in this practice. In another word, if a more fruitful reform of English education in China would be expected to be achieved by taking CLT method as a point of penetration, an intensive investigation on the nature of language, the nature of human being, and an essential relationship between man and language is indispensable. A philosophical theoretical framework of language is going to bridge the gaps between the related studies, and moreover, to integrate language accuracy and language communicativeness, which has been presupposed of their independent operation in a traditional English class. Hence, this paper holds that only a study of the communicative language philosophy would provide a solid foundation for a further promotion and development of CLT in China.

Both the design of CECL coursebook and the establishment of CLT have reflected a philosophical understanding of the initiators about the nature of language and language use (Munby, 1978; Widdowson, 1978, 1979, p. 56; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979, p. 24; Li Xiaoju, 1984, p. 18; Crookes, 2009, pp. 68-71). According the concerned literature, the chief editor of CECL coursebook Professor Li Xiaoju has a profound thought on the philosophical meaning of CECL teaching and learning in the sight of philosophy of language. Professor Li has given certain explanations on it (Li Xiaoju, 1984, p. 18). At the same time, there are also a few domestic studies (Fan Changrong, 1999; Sun Ming, 2007; He Anping & Li Hua, 2012; Zheng Lingjuan, 2020) having launched a philosophical thinking of communicative English teaching in China. Nevertheless, there is not yet a comprehensive and systematic literature on CECL from the perspective of philosophy (including philosophy of language). And the concerned research is far from being adequate.

3. Method and Aims

On the basis of intensive investigation of CECL coursebook corpus, this paper carries out the connection and thinking of the coursebook on the philosophical level, discovers and clarifies the philosophical concepts implied in CECL course design, which is going to contribute to the further exploration of the philosophical concepts in CLT in conjunction with the latest research on CLT, with a view to construct a systematic and muti-dimensional theoretical basis of language philosophy for CLT.

This study aims to construct a philosophical foundation of language for communicative English teaching by detailed examining the philosophical ideas underlying the design and the compilation of CECL coursebook. The study intends to reveal the essential philosophical unity between language and thought (Li Xiaoju, 1984; Humboldt, 1999; Gadamer,H. G., 2007; Wu Xudong, 2015) which has been reflected in CECL through its substantial descriptive and explanatory dialogical tasks (Russell, 2014; Xie Wenyu, 2017) combined with cultural differences and individual variations, the innate quality of language as being open, dynamic and cyclic (Li Xiaoju, 1984; Gadamer, 1977; Widdowson, 1978; Heidegger, 1987; Habermas, J., 1989; Walcott, 2007) has been realized in CECL as its facilitation of the intersubjective dialogical connection and interaction between cultures and learners; and language vitality in its authentic use (Li Xiaoju, 1984; Wittgenstein, 2001; Gadamer, 2007; Wu Xudong, 2015; Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 2003; Hu Xiaoyi & Hu Haijian, 2019) through the meticulously designed time, place and relationship for each situation of communication in CECL teaching.

3.1 Philosophical Understanding of Communicative English Teaching

The core ideology of “Whole Person Education” proposed by Professor Li Xiaoju (1984) in CECL teaching stands as an organic whole with the philosophical ideas underlying the design and the compilation of CECL coursebook. The fact provides an opportunity for the construction of a philosophical foundation of language for communicative English teaching in China. A solid and systematic philosophical foundation of language will improve the difficult situations encountered in communicative English teaching such as between choosing language accuracy and language communicativeness, which in nature is a mistaken split of language and life experience, or be more exact, language and human, for it’s a way to look at language as an object or a tool that human makes use of (Li Xiaoju, 1984; Qian Guanlian, 2001). Yet a philosophical understanding of language teaching and learning will picture man’s growth and development in language learning, for language learning should have been a process for showing the bi-directional relationship between words and world (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1964, 1969). Therefore, based on a close language philosophical investigation on CECL as a flexible, humanity-centered, and forward-looking coursebook, the construction of philosophical foundation of language will deepen the reform of and give injection of vitality to communicative English teaching project in China.

3.2 Philosophical Ideas in CECL Coursebook Design

This study is going to reveal an interactive relationship between language and life being, language and the world implicated in CECL coursebook by exploring how the arrangement of CECL activities presents the cognitive process of human being towards the world through language learning, and the achievement of understanding and communication between subjective world and objective world. Hence, the paper will give a very detailed summarize and analysis on the teaching designing and content arrangement of CECL coursebook in order to expound the dialogical nature of language and its philosophical principles for the achievement of communicative competence and language proficiency by means of dialogue in different ways. Meanwhile, the paper is going to explain how the innate quality of language as being open, dynamic and cyclic (Li Xiaoju, 1984; Gadamer, 1977; Widdowson, 1978; Heidegger, 1987; Habermas, J., 1989; Walcott, 2007) has been realized in CECL as its facilitation of the intersubjective dialogical connection and interaction between cultures and learners.

3.2.1 Language and Life Being

First, a close study on the substantial descriptive and explanatory dialogical tasks combined with cultural differences and individual variations will be operated to reveal the essential philosophical unity between language and thought reflected in CECL coursebook. The naming, descriptive and explanatory functions of language standing out in CECL tasks arrangement vividly reflect how human being launches his cognitive process for understanding the world. The issue that CECL coursebook truly concerns is what is happening to human being with language as a medium instead of how to master a language. Rather than taking language form and structure as both a starting point and destination as following the traditional language learning pattern, CECL coursebook stresses the manifestation of life being in human language using, that is, the manifestation of language logic and world view through language bearings. Thus, the target language has been disposed as a medium for its participation and achievement of understanding, but not as an object of learning as in traditional language teaching (Gadamer, 2007, p. 391-392).

Communication in English has been established as the only method and the target of CECL learning, which shows a philosophical view of Language as a fundamental way of life being (Gadamer, 1999; Wittgenstein, 2001). Learning to use a foreign language means the learner will combine his world view and his own language with the foreign language he is using (Gadamer, 1999; Wittgenstein, 2001). In another word, learning to use a foreign language is to gain a different world experience outside the life experience of one's own language (Humboldt, 1999; Wu Xudong, 2015). Meanwhile, our past life experiences and world views will be led into the foreign language we're using. We cannot draw out English from communication because English has already integrated into our life once we are communicating in English. Therefore, the design of CECL coursebook reflects a fundamental philosophical view of language learning as language using in communication, which vividly pictures human in their different life beings (Wittgenstein, 2001).

CECL learning renders language learning as a process of recognizing and understanding the interactive relationship between language and the world, language and life being, rather than putting a language as a static, independent system for imitation and repetition. Once its communication begins, the language with its convention will be integrated with language learning. As during CECL learning, some significant changes will surely take place in English as a language with its long-standing traditions for learning to communicate in English by Chinese speakers means meeting and communication between two different thoughts and life beings. Thus, communicative English for Chinese learners has been stimulating vitality as well as creativity in English rules and English life being.

3.2.2 Dialogical Nature of Language

Then the paper is going to analyze how CECL teaching and learning reflects a philosophical understanding of the dialogical nature of language. Language is not an abstract formal system but a social behavior of language user who takes part in interactions with others, a product of intersubjectivity (Austin, 1962; Ciepiela, K., 2016; Horne, K., 2014; Habermas, J., 1989; Li Xiaoju, 1984). Hence, dialogue is the only means by which a language could be fully understood and learned. The major function of language is response rather than reflection, which can only take place in communication as in language game (Austin, 1962; Wittgenstein, 2001). Dialogue can only be established in mutual responses between interlocutors. Here, dialogue does not only refer to free talk or Q and A in foreign language class, but rather a communicative interaction with deeper meaning, which will lead from meeting and collision of thoughts and ideas to mutual understanding until a harmonious new meaning will be arrived. Here, through the meticulously designed time, place and relationship for each situation of communication, the planning of CECL coursebook has facilitated intersubjective dialogical connection and interaction between cultures and leaners from different aspects.

The choice of topics and materials of CECL coursebook gives due consideration of both differences and similarities between two languages (Chinese and English) in terms of their culture and history. Language learning is first to expe-

rience a dialogue between two different ways of thinking, two different cultures because learning a language is learning to understand a world view (Humboldt, 1999; Li Xiaoju, 1987; Wittgenstein, 2001). Although English is the target language in CECL learning, the design and the arrangement in CECL coursebook has combined substantial topics and tasks which are closely concerned with Chinese culture and tradition. In this way, CECL learners will be invited into a comparison between two different cultures and thoughts, which meanwhile helps to build up an equal dialogue between two languages.

Moreover, dialogues in CECL class also take place between different CECL learners, between CECL learners and CECL teachers, between text authors and CECL learners. The design of CECL coursebook has successfully introduced individual knowledge and experiences at different levels into dialogues by fully exploring individual variations in its material choice and task arrangement.

More importantly, the design of CECL course book reflects a philosophical understanding of "dialogue". An authentic dialogue is a language game (Wittgenstein, 2001), which runs on unplanned without following any interlocutor's wish. To be more exact, a dialogue is like an encounter between interlocutors. So, the interlocutor on any side will not decide how the dialogue is going on or end, and which word is going to be used. In this sense, dialogue takes up a domain of "us" rather than of "me" (Gadamer, 2007). Hence, instead of drills on sentence patterns, learning a foreign language is playing a language game by having a dialogue with the target language, and by building up dialogues with others with the target language as the medium. A language game is a coordination between subject and object rather than a projection from one over another. Therefore, the paper is going to explain how the design of CECL coursebook foregrounds the openness and nondeterminacy of authentic dialogue by creating conditions to make dialogues happen. How the arrangement of CECL coursebook draws the learners' attention to language use for the real ruler in a dialogue is not the people who take part in but the dialogue itself, or say, the language used in the dialogue.

3.2.3 Dialectical Thinking of Language

The core idea of CECL coursebook is to achieve humanity orientation with the guidance of the dialectical thinking of language. Dialogue is a cyclic process for understanding because anyone involved in a dialogue must have his Vorurteil and dialogue provides the chance for one's Vorurteil or preunderstanding to be amended and improved (Gadamer, 2007). Hence, it is by this cyclic process that meaning will be clarified and revealed. Meanwhile, by dialogue, "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 55) will be achieved because a dialogue will lead the interlocutors to arrive at a consensus and will broaden each one's horizon. Dialogue stays open and dynamic for collisions and consensuses will cycle endlessly in the process, which indicates the dialectical thinking of language.

First, CECL learning frees English learning from the tradition of rigid repeating and reciting. The design of CECL coursebook creates an opportunity for English to further grow and develop. Communicative English for Chinese learners means the meeting of Chinese context and the historical context of English. Under this situation, English is going to evolve with dialogues between different cultures and different thoughts. Therefore, CECL learning stresses language appropriateness in its use rather than language correctness because a language rule can only work on basis of a specified language community and social convention (Wittgenstein, 2001). Standard is never absolute and universal. Communicative English for Chinese learners well portrays a dialectical relationship between language convention and language game because the former presents culture, value and tradition while the latter offers change, freedom and creativity.

The design of CECL coursebook intends to create conditions for multi-directional dialogues between languages, cultures, and individuals. The arrangement of CECL course task series reflects the idea of carrying out activities through the interaction between reader's preunderstanding and the dialogical response-inviting structure. The subjective world of language learners enriches the cultural connotation of the target language, and the understanding and application of the target language helps learners to see their own life activities, creativity and aesthetic value, so that learners can understand the target language more deeply and better understand the self as an individual and cultural being. The ultimate goal of teaching is not to transfer knowledge, but to help learners acquire the ability of analysis, judgment and thinking. The arrangement of CECL course reflects the guiding ideology of "Whole Person Education" by forming multi-level dialogue in class, and the goal is to encourage students to experience, understand and construct meaning independently.

The most critical aspect of human-oriented teaching is to care and understand each individual in the learning process. Language learning is not mechanical input and output, and classroom dialogue is not just for sake of communication. The purpose of this process is to enable learners to associate the learning process with them, integrate the past into the present, and realize the purpose of understanding. If the purpose of understanding is to point to the meaning itself, then the ultimate meaning of classroom dialogue is to point to the subject's self-retrospection and improvement in this process, because the real meaning of classroom dialogue will take place and act on the interlocutors' life, becoming a process of self-understanding. If language learning just sticks to vocabulary and grammar and overemphasizes the sys-

tematisms, integrity and theory of knowledge, learners will be confined in a closed circle of knowledge, and students' life world and spiritual world ‘e’ a forgotten corner, which makes learning lack the meaning and value of life.

Therefore, communicative English for Chinese learners means constantly seeking understanding and identification, which will provide a chance for discovering family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 2001) in thought, emotion, life and humanity. Through dialogue, we can achieve the fusion of horizons with the growth of language, human self-examination and cultural understanding.

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