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An Innovative Model for Foreign Language Teaching: A Case Study of Activity Design in the CECL Coursebook

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Abstract: The enduring vitality of *Communicative English for Chinese Learners* (CECL) [1], edited by Professor Li Xiaoju, stems from the "generative pretraining transformation system" embedded within its activity design. This system elevates CECL beyond the single label of a "CLT coursebook," turning it into an "innovation engine" that guides learners step by step from language beginners to autonomous communicators. This paper first explains the theoretical core of the "sustained innovation" model, then analyses in depth the three major features of the organizational structure of CECL activities design. Throughout the analysis, relevant theories from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language are drawn upon to provide a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the philosophical underpinnings of CECL's design. Finally, the paper argues that CECL offers not merely a set of teaching materials, but a metamodel for achieving sustained innovation in foreign language education—a model that carries important implications for contemporary foreign language teaching theory and practice.

Keywords: Communicative English for Chinese Learners; Innovation; Model

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1. Introduction

The historical evolution of foreign language teaching methodologies is often portrayed as a series of revolutionary changes—from the GrammarTranslation Method to the AudioLingual Method and then to the Communicative Approach [2,3]—each shift accompanied by a critique of the old paradigm and the establishment of a new one. However, this "revolutionary narrative" obscures a key fact: many courses that claim to adopt the latest teaching methods often fall into the trap of "old wine in new bottles," or sink back into silence after a brief burst of enthusiasm. The root cause is that they introduce only innovative "events" (such as communicative activities) without constructing the "process" that supports innovation, that is, an

internal system capable of continuously generating effective teaching practices.

This paper argues that genuine pedagogical innovation is not a onetime disruption, but a form of sustained innovation. Such innovation relies on an internal, evolvable innovation model. *Communicative English for Chinese Learners* (CECL) is a perfect example of this. Introducing the Communicative Approach in the 1980s, CECL was undoubtedly a major innovation. But its lasting vitality stems from the "generative pretraining transformation system" embedded within its activity design. This system elevates CECL beyond the single label of a "communicative textbook," turning it into an innovation engine that guides learners step by step from language beginners to autonomous communicators.

2. The theoretical core of the innovation model

As indicated in the introduction, sustained innovation depends on an internal system characterized by three major features: "pretraining," "generativity," and "transformation." The activity design of CECL perfectly embodies these three features, and its philosophical foundation can be traced back to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

CECL's "pretraining" is based on profound philosophical insights and empirical observations regarding the nature of language and the laws of learning. Its training data draw on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language as well as an understanding of students' cognitive patterns [4,5]. The core "grammatical rule" underlying this system is that effective communication must be grounded in deep cognitive understanding, and that the development of language ability is a function of the development of cognitive ability. This determines the underlying logic of the activity design. The fact that descriptive activities, which are responsible for cognitive construction [6], account for more than 90% is a necessary manifestation of the "pretraining" logic in curriculum design. Grounded in Wittgenstein's principle that "the meaning of language lies in its use," descriptive activities require learners to observe, distinguish, name, and explain things in real or simulated life situations, thereby accomplishing conceptual encoding, semantic network construction, and schema adjustment at the cognitive level. The essence of such activities is the coconstruction of language and thought: through descriptive tasks, learners internalize externally presented language forms into a structured knowledge system, providing cognitive "raw material" for subsequent socialcommunicative activities. For this very reason, CECL's pretraining places cognitive construction before communicative practice and maintains it throughout, making descriptive activities the underlying logic of all activity design.

The CECL system endows students with the ability to generate dynamic, contextually appropriate communicative discourse instead of memorizing work. This is achieved through the dynamic coordination of its three major activity types [7]. Descriptive activities provide the raw material and toolkit that constitute a vast "meaning resource pool." Hybrid activities act as "generative nodes," inviting learners to call upon different materials and tools from the resource pool and to recombine them creatively according to specific communicative tasks. For example, the same theme of "environmental protection" will generate discourse that differs markedly in style, structure, and wording in the two different tasks of "writing a report" and "making a public service advertisement." This generative capacity illustrates the dynamic and generative nature of language games and is a concrete manifestation of the infinite possibilities of discourse, which is also the highest goal of the generativity of the innovation model.

Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" provides an important theoretical perspective for understanding the internal connections among CECL activities. "Family resemblance" points out that

although different language games share no single essential feature, they are linked through an "overlapping" and "crisscrossing" network of similarities. This is precisely the most subtle aspect of CECL's design. It ensures that every new communicative task is not isolated, but an evolution that connects smoothly with alreadyacquired knowledge and skills. Within a unit, through the relay relationship of "descriptive → social→ hybrid," the introduction of new skills is always built on prior cognitive foundations. Between units, through the spiral recurrence of activity types and family resemblance, a new complex language game always maintains a clear kinship with previously learned simpler language games, enabling learners to draw on prior experience to meet new challenges. This design ensures the continuity of the learning process. Thus, CECL's design makes use of family resemblance to help learners achieve a smooth transition when facing new language tasks by relying on existing experience.

3. The architecture of the CECL innovation model

3.1. The foundation and engine of the system

The descriptive activities are the main body of the system's "pretraining." Through the progressive distribution of ten subtypes, they construct a threedimensional cognitive world.

The descriptive activities in lowerlevel units of Volumes 1 and 2 intend to bind linguistic symbols to the concrete world and build a referential, spatial basic coordinate system. In contrast, the dominant types of descriptive activity in the higherlevel units (Volumes 3 and 4) shift to concepts, principles, experience, and processes, marking a clear "cognitive level jump." The focus moves from "what is it?" to "why?" and "how does it work?", driving thinking towards abstraction and system. This shift reflects the emphasis in Wittgenstein's later philosophy on the diversity of language use, that language is used not only to describe facts but also to ask questions, pray, give orders, and so on. From a crosscutting perspective, cultureoriented and methodoriented activities are evenly distributed across different units. They act as "horizontal connectors" of the system, injecting social meaning and metacognitive strategies respectively, thereby ensuring the depth and direction of cognitive development.

Thus, this network guarantees that any communicative act by the learner is supported by a rich, multidimensional cognitive schema—a design that closely aligns with Wittgenstein's idea that "language games are rooted in forms of life."

3.2. The generative mechanism of the system

Mastery of language games requires a process from learning rules to free participation, and this is precisely the theoretical basis for the relay relationship in CECL's design. The generativity and transformation ability of the innovation model in CECL's activity design are realized through the following two relationships.

First, on the microlevel, it is a relay relationship, which indicates a linear, temporal generative workflow. Within a teaching sequence, the descriptive activities responsible for cognitive construction lead to social activities focused on training and hybrid activities that integrate practice, thereby forming a closed loop. It ensures that language ability is systematically and repeatably transformed from knowledge into practice, forming the basic workflow for generating discourse.

Second, on the macro-level is a network relationship, which presents a nonlinear, spatial resourceretrieval system. The learning outcomes of the entire coursebook are integrated into a resource network. When facing a new hybrid activity, learners can freely draw the required knowledge types from the

“cognitive resource network” and appropriate strategies from the “communicative gene pool” (core functions distilled from social activities) [8]. This gives learners the ability to break free from the activity sequence and respond creatively to the infinite scenarios of the real world.

3.3. The evolutionary path of the system

Sustained innovation requires that the system guide learners from dependence to autonomy.

First, the design of hybrid activities shows a distinctive “scaffolding removal model.” In lowerlevel units, hybrid activities are more numerous and use explicit social tasks to drive cognition, with a structure of “communication as the body, cognition as the function.” In higherlevel units, hybrid activities decrease in number but increase sharply in complexity, turning into comprehensive cognitive exercises, and the structure reverses to “cognition as the body, communication as the function.” At this stage, the explicit scaffolding is removed, and the communicative intention has been internalized within the complex cognitive activity itself. This design accords with Wittgenstein’s description of the language learning process, moving from rulefollowing to creative application [9].

Second, the recurrence of family resemblances means that CECL tasks present multiple variants of the same function (e.g., “giving advice,” “expressing requests”) across different units and contexts, displaying its “family genealogy.” This enables learners to recognize the kinship between new and old games and to adjust their strategies flexibly. This is precisely the manifestation of “generativity.” Successful language users can flexibly adjust their discourse strategies according to different situations, which is precisely the ability that CECL’s familyresemblance design aims to cultivate.

4. Contemporary significance of the CECL innovation model

The innovation model revealed in CECL’s activity design carries important implications for contemporary foreign language teaching theory and practice.

First, the CECL model suggests that curriculum design should go beyond the level of content organization and focus on the architecture of capacitygeneration pathways. This means that textbook design should construct a progressive ecosystem that guides learners from dependence to autonomy.

Second, the teacher’s role shifts from knowledge transmitter to cognitive guide and discourse practice coach in the CECL innovation model. Teachers need to deeply understand the design concepts behind the three activity types, provide appropriate scaffolding at the right time, and help students establish organic connections between cognition and communication. This role shift places new demands on teacher professional development.

Furthermore, in the digital age, CECL’s innovation model provides a theoretical framework for technology integration. Educational technology should serve the construction of the innovation model, achieving more precise pretraining through data analysis, supporting more flexible generation through adaptive learning, and promoting smoother transformation through intelligent feedback. A technologyenhanced CECL model holds the promise of offering learners a more personalized and efficient learning experience.

5. Conclusion

The innovation model revealed in CECL’s activity design is remarkable because it tells us that pedagogical innovation should not stop at introducing a new method or a new activity; rather, it should aim to construct

an ecosystem that continuously generates effective learning experiences.

This model shifts the focus of instructional design from content arrangement to the architecture of capacitygeneration pathways. It emphasizes the foundational nature of structure, that deep, structured cognitive construction is an asymmetrical advantage for any communicative ability. It also stresses the generativity of the system, that the goal of the system is not to produce standard answers, but to cultivate the ability to generate infinite contextually appropriate responses. And it underscores the sustainability of learning. In an era of accelerating technological change and increasingly complex educational goals, the "sustained innovation" model embodied in CECL's activity design is more enlightening than ever. It points us towards a future where curriculum design should strive to construct elegant, selfconsistent, "generative systems" that guide learners towards intrinsic growth. Only in this way can foreign language education move from the transmission of knowledge to genuine human empowerment [10].

At a time when foreign language teaching faces many challenges, the activity design of the CECL textbook points us a way out—by constructing a sustainable innovation model, we can achieve qualitative change and transcendence in foreign language education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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