

CLT AND CHINA: A REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

This article is a reflection and evaluation on the current push to promote Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the methodology of choice within China. Despite the Chinese government's selection of CLT as the methodology of choice, four key barriers to its implementation still exist. These are examination constraints, availability of teachers, perceptions of CLT classrooms, and motivation. It is concluded that if CLT is to be an appropriate methodology for China, then there needs to be an overhaul of the examination system and a re-training of available teachers.

CLT IN THE WORLD

Although communicative language teaching is not new, emerging in the 1970s (Richards, 2006) from the dissatisfaction from “ineffective” teaching methods that came before (Rowe, 2008), it has no universally agreed upon definition and what it means can depend on who you ask (Littlewood, 2011, p. 541). However, one unifying feature of CLT is the belief that language is communication (Richards, 2006) and was founded upon the work on Hymes' (1966) ‘communicative competence’ and later Canale and Swain's (1980) interpretation that included four key elements: grammatical competence, sociocultural competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This reinforces the view of language for communication and meaning, rather than solely as a linguistic competence (Byram and Hu,

2017, p. 47). There are certain characteristics that have been ascribed to CLT classes. One example of this is David Nunan's ‘5 Features’ of CLT (Nunan, 1991, p. 279):

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

Having passed through a number of distinct developmental periods, it is now at the stage where it is possible to talk of a ‘postmethod’ era, one in which the teachings from the “ivory towers” of western educational institutions have been questioned and the importance of local knowledge re-evaluated (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). However, pedagogical methodologies are still at the forefront of teaching and have also been described as an ‘essential element of a teacher's make-up’ (Harmer, 2003, p. 290) with CLT being said to ‘dominate’ English teaching around the world (Hall, 2016, p. 215). It has achieved such a hegemony of thought that Bax wrote about the ‘CLT Attitude’ (Bax, 2003, p. 27), which is the belief that CLT is the way to teach a language and no other methods are worthwhile.

As with the methods before (Grammar-translation, audio-lingual, etc), CLT was developed by western academics who, as has been argued, may have presumed

that their cultural contexts are constant universally (Ahmad and Sajjad, 2011). Such contexts, also known as ‘Britain, Australia, and North America’ (Holliday, 1994, p. 4), are characterised by small, private, multilingual classrooms with an abundance of resources and well-trained native teachers.

This method was then exported, either by foreign teachers or local teachers trained in the west then returned home, to be used in classrooms around the world, also known as ‘Tertiary, Secondary, and Primary’ (Holliday, 1994, p. 4). These are typically large, monolingual, under-resourced classes with non-native teachers who have to consider wider social influences. It has been argued that much of CLT was ‘imposed’ upon teachers in different contexts, they had not generated it, rather their teaching was ‘imitative not initiated’ (Rubdy, 2009), what Phillipson terms a ‘transfer of technology’ (Phillipson, 1992). It is no surprise then, that the appropriacy of CLT, having such predefined solutions to teaching, was questioned when used in contexts that have vastly different social, cultural, and economic circumstances (Rubdy, 2009).

THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Since 2001 the Ministry of Education (MoE) in China has officially promoted the adoption of CLT in primary and secondary school classrooms (Li, 2010), followed in 2004 and 2007 in universities (Han and Yin, 2016). This is a huge shift from previous policies which promoted traditional methods and mastery of grammar and vocabulary, now the aim is to develop communicative competence and allow students to experiment with language (Hu, 2005a, p. 15). Even so, CLT in China has been described as more ‘rhetoric than reality’ (Nunan, 2003, p. 606), meaning that although CLT is supposedly how English is to be taught, the experience in the

classroom is somewhat different. The appropriacy of CLT for China continues to be debated by scholars, students, and not least of all, teachers, with no sign of a consensus emerging any time soon (Anderson, 1993; Hu, 2005a; Hu, 2005b; Liu, 2015; Rao, 2002; Yu, 2001). This section of the article will discuss how contextual factors such as examination constraints, availability and attitude of local teachers, perceptions of class sizes and CLT, and motivation, affect the implementation of CLT in China. These factors have been chosen as they appear to be the most commonly cited factors when discussing the adoption of CLT in China.

EXAMINATION CONSTRAINTS

teachers ‘teach to the test’, resulting in the neglect of non-tested aspects of English (Fang and Clarke, 2014, p. 111), and methodologies that reflect the grammar and vocabulary intense elements of the test (Burnaby and Sun, 1989). The two most important English related tests in China are the Gaokao (university entrance exam) and CET (College English Test), both of which contain no mandatory speaking section, though there is an optional speaking test for the CET (Zheng and Cheng, 2008). The result is a narrow curriculum that prioritises mastery of grammar and vocabulary, taught via grammar-translation, and teachers that are afraid to try new teaching methods (Li, 2010, p. 445). Equally, students feel dejected by the limitations placed on their learning by exams. This is exemplified by one student’s comment when asked about learning, ‘I know it is very important to be able to communicate in English. But if I want to graduate from university, I have to pass all kinds of examinations, which are all grammar-based. That is why I like to work on English grammar’ (Rao, 2002, p. 95). That is not to say

CLT is ill-suited to the teaching of grammar (Thompson, 1994; Fotos, 1994) but an established non-CLT methodology, such as grammar-translation, which mirrors test items and is better suited to the abilities of teachers (Yu, 2001, p. 197) is still seen as the better choice by both students and teachers.

AVAILABILITY AND BELIEFS OF LOCAL TEACHERS

It is through teachers that curricula are realised and lessons delivered, they are very much part of the context of a teaching environment, being the implementers of teaching directives. It is important to remember that CLT was devised with well educated, native speakers who have a degree of autonomy; unfortunately practicality means that this is rarely the case in China (Liao, 2004, p. 271), leading to questions as to whether CLT can ever really work in China.

When the policy of CLT was being proposed, a view acknowledged by Chinese English teachers themselves was that they lack the competences needed to implement CLT (Burnaby and Sun, 1989, p. 219), and there are indications that this is still the case today (Yan, 2012; Rao, 2013). An equally prevalent view is that they do not see CLT as applicable to their own context (Li, 2010, p. 445). The former point is also noted by external observers, commenting that teachers’ poor English skills and inadequate training mean it is either very difficult or impossible for many teachers to use CLT in their classrooms (Fang and Clarke, 2014, p. 114; Liao, 2004, p. 272; Nunan, 2003, p. 606; Yu, 2001, p. 197). Similarly, though the MoE developed a new curriculum and accompanying teaching materials as stated earlier, teachers are failing to understand the principles underlying these new resources and are continuing to use them in traditional ways (Hu, 2005a, p. 16; Yu, 2015).



Chinese culture is heavily influenced by Confucianism, which emphasises education, though in such a way as to run counter to CLT in regards to the roles of teachers and students. A Chinese proverb encapsulates the role of the teacher as a supplier of knowledge by saying, 'To give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water to dispense' (Hu, 2002, p. 98). Teachers' subject knowledge is prioritized over pedagogic knowledge. This philosophy is evident in attitudes towards teaching, by both teachers and students, where CLT and less traditional classroom learning practices, such the use of games or communicative activities, are met with scepticism as a teacher's job is to explicitly impart knowledge (Anderson, 1993, p. 473; Zhu, 2012, p. 801).

PERCEPTIONS OF CLT CLASSROOMS

China has a population of over 1.3 billion people and, aside from more prosperous eastern coastal cities, an often under-resourced education system (Hu, 2003, p.303), meaning class sizes are often larger than those envisaged by CLT's creators. Though it is true there is discrepancy in class sizes, as is to be expected with a country so large, primary, secondary, middle, and high school classes can number over 100, the OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, reported that the average class size for China in 2014 was 48 (OECD, 2018).

What is important is not the number of students in a class, but how teachers and those in the education sector interpret this. Often being used as a justification for the reluctance to implement CLT, or CLT-like activities, large class sizes are seen as difficult to manage or unsuitable for CLT (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998, p. 742; Yu, 2015), therefore are perceived

to necessitate the more teacher-controlled grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods (Hu, 2005a, p. 651). Physical factors such as available classrooms and furniture also affect teaching practices. Students typically sit on long benches which are bolted to the floor, severely limiting student interaction patterns typical of CLT (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998, p. 743). Furthermore, large-class coping strategies such as peer evaluation undermine traditional Chinese educational values, as students question what they can learn from each other and see feedback as one role of the teacher (Hu, 2002, p. 100).

MOTIVATION

Motivation in English learning is somewhat of a dichotomy in China. On the one hand the motivation to learn English in China has been increasing ever since its entrance into the WTO (Lam, 2005, p. 83) and China has the greatest non-native English speaking population in the world (He and Zhang, 2010, p. 769). On the other hand students become increasingly disinterested with English as they progress through school (Lee, 2009, p. 139). Perhaps more accurate would be that Chinese students are disillusioned with the lessons they receive, a 2011 study on motivation in English learning in universities found that 53.7% of students indicated they either 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' that the current teaching practices meet their needs and expectations (Pan and Block, 2011, p. 296).

With such a high percentage of students unhappy with the experience of learning English, one may wonder why a situation like this occurs. One reason could be instrumental motivation. Instrumental motivation is plentiful in China, mentioned earlier was the fact that exams are the major reason English is studied as English is seen as a subject rather than a form of communication (Lam, 2005). A phenomenon noted by Liu (2015)

is that once students pass the CET exam, the last English exam they are likely to take, their English proficiency decreases (Liu, 2015, p. 130). With motivation linked to exams, it may be that students endure their English lessons which utilise grammar-translation as they see it as a means to an end. Of note is that this would also support the recent 'L2 motivational self-system' proposed by Dörnyei (2009), whereby Chinese learners would like to view themselves as academically successful rather than competent English users in their ideal self (Li, 2014).

The lack of integrative motivation, that is, the desire to study a language in order to be part of that language speaking community (Ushioda and Dörnyei, 2009, p. 2) has been noted as a reason for the apparent lack of communicative competence in Chinese classrooms (Yu, 2009, p. 87). When investigated, one study found that learners at university had little desire or ambition to integrate into English speaking communities and equally did not identify with English-speaking cultures; rather they thought of English in terms of instrumental motivational factors, specifically passing tests and job opportunities (Zhao, 2012, p. 105). Therefore the relevance of a teaching methodology which highlights communicative features would not be as valued.

DISCUSSION

Although there is a government-sanctioned requirement to change to CLT in all levels of education, the uptake of CLT has been limited at best, with contextual constraints, real or perceived, cited as a reason. Two factors above all have limited CLT's introduction; examination constraints and availability and beliefs of local teachers. Other factors include perceptions of class size and motivation, though to a lesser extent.

It seems the real issue is that

Chinese language tests, which emphasise linguistic knowledge, appear to be contrary to the MoE's aim for communicative competence in language learning. Until this changes, and tests, which are so important in this context, reflect the MoE's aims, it is doubtful whether CLT will fully be adopted. Negative washback means teachers and students comply with a method that teaches them to pass tests, while limiting their overall language ability. At the same time many teachers lack the training and competence to implement CLT. In order to implement the government's policy of CLT the (re) training of teachers is crucial (Lee, 2009, p. 149). This is a daunting prospect given that there are over one million English teachers in China (Luo, 2014, p. 206). Currently and historically teacher-training has focussed on improving subject knowledge, rather than pedagogic knowledge (Fang and Clarke, 2014, p 1), however, experimental teacher training projects are in the early stages of being trialled with the intention of creating new teachers versed in CLT (Fang and Clarke, 2014). The results of which are not entirely a triumph for CLT, rather, trainee-teachers 'have surrendered' to the pressures of exams and school expectations of 'what a teacher should do', meaning little CLT is used in classrooms (Fang and Clarke, 2014) . It has been said that if teachers had a sound understanding of teaching theory they would be more supportive of CLT and encouraged to overcome the constraints of Chinese classrooms (Yu, 2001, p. 197).

This was partially true for a British Council organised teaching project which found that both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that Chinese teachers were 'open to CLT' and 'showed a willingness to change and improve their teaching practice', however they resisted completely converting to CLT, instead preferring to concentrate on the linguistic forms of language (Gu, 2005, p. 291). The overall message being that CLT can work, but it cannot be imposed 'as is', Chinese practitioners need to

be shown, and experience, how it can work in their contexts, with the burden of this being on the exporters (Gu, 2005, p. 302).

In terms of large class sizes, studies have shown that this is not an insurmountable barrier to interaction patterns (Todd, 2006, p. 6) and teaching methodology (Snow, 2007, p. 220), rather teaching-learning activities are more important than actual class size (Kumar, 1992). A negotiated pedagogy between teachers and students has been shown to be successful for dealing with this problem, especially when teachers explain their methods, the reasoning behind it, and provide encouragement (Anderson, 1993, p. 476).

If CLT is ever to become a success in China, both teachers and students need to negotiate a methodology that acknowledges the constraints of exams and the need for students to pass them. At the same time, teacher-training, especially in pedagogy, needs to be extended and CLT shown to be situationally relevant in a way that address the constraints of teaching and learning in China so that it is not seen as 'just another western import'. China is going through a significant change in regard to language teaching, with the shoots of CLT beginning to take root. Time will tell if the new generation of teachers will be able to bring about the change envisaged by the MoE, or if, as early signs indicate, the prevailing conditions will remain. Whatever happens, there is no doubt this is a fascinating time to be involved in language teaching in China.



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