

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND SITUATIONAL CONSTRAINTS IN CHINA

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Abstract

China has the largest population of English as a Foreign (EFL) teachers and students in the world. Currently there are about 200 million primary and secondary school EFL pupils, and 500,000 and 1.5 million secondary and primary school EFL teachers respectively. In the 1980s China introduced the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) into the secondary schools as a reaction against the traditional teaching methods, but CLT encountered difficulties that constrain its use in the classroom. Such factors included teachers' low level of English proficiency, students' resistance to participation, and large class sizes. To overcome these difficulties, the Chinese government took several measures. For example, a mandatory teaching syllabus was published which introduced communicative competence as one of the main teaching goals. The national English examination includes communicative testing components. Teacher training for the new method was conducted. New textbooks with CLT components were published for secondary schools. As a result Chinese teachers have been making progress towards communicative teaching. This article explores these difficulties and the measures the Chinese government has taken to deal with them.

Introduction

Among the various methods of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), CLT has been widely accepted as the most effective approach for developing students' ability to use language effectively and appropriately in communication (Ellis, 1999). Originally created in UK in the 1970s as a reaction against more traditional methods, CLT possesses many advantages over traditional methods (Maley, 1986):

- They are more likely to produce communicative competence
- They are more immediately relevant since they offer the learner the opportunity of *using* the language for his/her own purposes earlier than do other approaches
- To this extent they are more motivating
- They are less wasteful of time and effort than approaches which attempt to teach the *whole* language system, since they teach only what is relevant and necessary
- They equip the learners with the appropriate skills for tackling the language in the real world.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), CLT can be summarized at the level of approach, design and procedure.

Approach	Design	Procedure
<p>1. Language is a tool for the expression of meaning. The primary function is to allow interaction and communication. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.</p> <p>2. Language is learned by communicating. Communicating is a process of social interaction. Learning is enhanced if it is meaningful to the learner. Meaning exists only as it is negotiated and is based on authentic language and social contexts.</p>	<p>1. Objectives include communicative competence, not merely grammatical correctness but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.</p> <p>2. Syllabuses are functional, notional, interactional, task-based or learner-generated.</p> <p>3. Classroom activities have a communicative intent and promote an integration of all four skills.</p> <p>3. Students are active communicators. The main task is to negotiate meaning based on a variety of factors and is responsible for their own learning in pair/group activities.</p> <p>4. Teacher is a facilitator of communication. The main role is to establish situations which promote authentic communication. The teacher is also a needs analyst, counsellor and manager, and sometimes enters into student communication activities as a peer interlocutor.</p> <p>5. Teaching materials are authentic and provide context for authentic communication.</p>	<p>1. Classroom practices include lots of pair and group work and have great varieties such as information gap activities and role-playing.</p> <p>2. The procedure is from controlled pre-communication activities (structural and quasi-communicative) to free communication (functional and social interaction activities).</p>

Table 1: Framework for CLT – adapted Richards & Rodgers (2001) pp. 153-177

The use of CLT is a worldwide phenomenon. “CLT is seen to be not a British, European, or U.S. phenomenon, but rather an international effort to respond to the needs of present-day language learners in many different contexts of learning” (Savignon, 1991, p. 261). Since its appearance, CLT has quickly spread to many other parts of the world. “Dozens of books, journal articles, and conference papers, in addition to an array of teaching materials, have been written under the banner of this movement” (Berns, 1984, p. 4). CLT became the driving force that shapes the planning, implementation, and evaluation of EFL teaching programmes. In this situation, curriculum planners, materials producers, testing experts, and teachers invariably described themselves as practitioners of CLT (Kumaradivelu, 1993). Being dissatisfied with the traditional way of teaching for a long time, EFL teachers are eager to try out a new way of teaching, hoping that it can enliven the language classrooms and compensate for the shortcomings of more traditional teaching methods (Kuo, 1995).

CLT was introduced into China in the 1980s as a strong reaction against traditional teaching methods which focused grammatical knowledge and translation skills and overlooked the important

aspect of communicative use of language. As a result, students coming out of traditional classrooms tended to be communicatively incompetent. To change this situation, there was an urgent need to introduce modern teaching methods. In 1984 Chinese scholar Li published the article “In Defense of the Communicative Approach” in *English Language Teaching Journal*, calling for the use of CLT in China. This article “profoundly affected Chinese teachers’ attitudes towards CLT” (Yu, 2000, p. 195). In 1993 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) required that teachers in secondary schools use CLT in their classroom. Thus a new teaching syllabus (SEDC, 1993) introduced communicative competence as one of the main teaching goals. Textbooks *Junior/Senior English for China* (SEDC, 1993) designed for CLT components were published for secondary schools.

It seems that CLT would be widely used in such a favorable situation. However, research studies in China reveal that CLT principles were rare in the classroom in the early 1990s. Hird (1995), an Australian scholar training EFL teachers in China, found very little use of CLT in classrooms. Hong Kong scholars, Ng and Tang (1997), used interview and observations to investigate four secondary schools in Shanghai and reported that teachers understood the rationale of CLT but still did not use it. Chinese scholars, for example Leng (1997), regarded CLT in China as “new bottles, old wine”. Campbell and Zhao (1993) described the teaching situation as “the dilemma”. These studies show that while teachers would like to use CLT, they did not. Thus there is a discrepancy between teacher attitudes and their classroom practices.

Constraints in the Implementation of CLT

The reason why CLT has not been widely adopted in Chinese schools is because of constraints which include teachers’ and learners’ low language proficiency, learners’ passive learning style, grammar-oriented examinations, large classes and so on.

Constraints Associated with the Teacher

Deficiency in spoken English

As non-native English speakers, most teachers know grammar quite well but cannot speak English fluently in the classroom. This is a reflection of the low level of teacher education and language training. In the late 1980s, the percentage of middle school teachers with BA degrees was only 28%, 12% of which were Russian majors, 8% of which had graduated from a 3-year BA programme during the Cultural Revolution. Teachers with associate degrees and with secondary

school diplomas were 4% and 29% respectively (Zuo, 1990, p. 34). According to Liu and Gong (2001), in the 1990s, out of 500,000 middle school teachers, 89.4% of junior middle school teachers and 55% of senior middle school teachers are professionally qualified. It means that 10.6% of the junior school teachers do not have the two-year post-secondary diploma of teaching as required by the SEDC and 45% of senior school teachers do not have four-year Bachelor degree of teaching. Unable to speak English fluently, some teachers have had to return to the traditional methods and used the first language (L1). "For them the grammar-translation method is the most acceptable because they can basically teach English in Chinese" (Yu, 2000, p.197).

Deficiency in sociolinguistic competence

CLT recognizes that language and culture are closely related and teachers should strive to develop students' cultural knowledge. However, most Chinese teachers have little knowledge of the target culture. Burnaby and Sun (1989) investigated 24 teachers in China in order to discover how appropriate and effective they are in applying CLT. They found that the teachers had difficulty in identifying appropriate cultural contexts for points. They have not been able to teach and to answer spontaneous questions about the target culture as they arise from interactions in the classroom with students. This led the teachers to go back into the teaching of grammatical knowledge, about which they were more confident.

Lack of training in CLT

Because so many teachers are not qualified, they need to be re-trained but few in-service opportunities have been available. School administrators were unwilling to let teachers attend full-time study because teachers could be found to relieve them. As a result, few teachers were familiar with the new teaching methodology. Thus it is hard for teachers to adapt themselves to radical changes. Ng and Tang (1997) reported that "Teachers find it difficult to organize their teaching which are now skills based. Teachers either do not know how to 'dramatize' the lesson in order to create situations for communication, or feel frustrated about the unsystematic arrangement of the textbook content" (p. 76). Teachers also found it difficult to create an English-speaking atmosphere in the classroom or school without the presence of native speakers (Burnaby & Sun, 1989, p. 228).

Little time for developing communicative materials

Before the new textbooks (SEDC, 1993) came into being, English textbooks had been developed under the principles of the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods. Libraries also did not contain enough authentic English texts. So teachers had to write their own materials and design

their own activities if they wanted to apply CLT. Thus they needed extra time to prepare. This additional work was a burden for teachers because they were already overloaded. A teacher must teach two classes (each class has more than 50 students), one hour for each class per day and 12 classes per week - already a considerable workload.

Constraints Associated with Students

Low Spoken English proficiency

Students do not start learning English until after they enter middle school (Grade 7). After a period of study they make progress in the reading and writing skills but not very much in listening and speaking. Thus oral activities were not possible or appeared to be difficult. Consequently, teachers became frustrated with CLT and in many cases gave it up. According to Leng (1997), Chinese students with low language proficiency often have difficulties in understanding teachers and in expressing themselves in English, and thus remain inactive in the classroom. Teachers have to slow down or repeat themselves if they want to encourage these students to participate. They also have to design special activities to lessen their anxiety to participate.

Lack of motivation for developing communicative competence

In a non-native English speaking country like China, students do not have many opportunities to use English for real-life communication outside of the classroom. Rather than being interested in abilities to use language for oral communicative, they have been much more concerned about grammar knowledge in order to pass the grammar-oriented tests or to get high test scores to enter universities, which has immediate and practical benefits.

Resistance to class participation

Influenced by Confucian education traditions, the teacher/student relationship has long been that of knowledge giver and knowledge receiver. Teachers dominate the classroom and students sit motionless as listeners. If teachers do not display knowledge, they are criticized as unqualified. Students rely on the teacher's instruction to acquire knowledge by taking and memoirising notes. Campbell and Zhao (1992) used questionnaires, interviews and observations to investigate students' assumptions about English learning. The students believed that grammar analysis is crucial, textbooks and classrooms exercises are essential, and teachers who do not dominate the classroom are seen as lazy or incompetent. Jones' (1995) questionnaire survey reveals that students expect a responsible teacher to assume the more direct roles of expert, director, model, and evaluator. Students complained that foreign teachers do not know how to teach, do not teach what students

need, and just waste time by messing around. The students tend to associate games and activities in the classroom with entertainment and are skeptical of their value as learning tools.

Constraints Associated with Educational System

Large class size

Because of so many students in secondary schools, a class consisting of more than 50 students is common. This is a hindrance for conducting activities and oral work in the classroom. It is also difficult for a teacher to monitor the whole class activities. In Ng and Tang's investigation (1997), a teacher complains, "we have 50 students in a class, and if each student speaks one sentence, it will take up the whole lesson" (p. 77). And if all the students are speaking in pair/group activities at the same time, it is very noisy.

Grammar-Oriented Examination

As a national examination, the Matriculation English Test (MET) developed by the SEDC used to be grammar-oriented and no content had been developed to include communicative testing, and had a significant backwash on teaching. Passing it or getting a high score in it in order to enter universities is the most important consideration for students. How successful teaching is depends on how well students succeed in the test. Therefore, "the test has been identified as the single most powerful influence in the resistance to innovation in educational practice in China" (Hird, 1995, p. 24). Ng and Tang (1997) reported, "under the system of elite education in China, teachers see their primary goal in teaching as to prepare students for public examinations" (p. 76). To prepare students for the examinations, teachers have to strictly follow the schedule prescribed by the school, leaving no room for adjustment to suit different abilities in the skills developing process, and no time for conducting language activities in the classroom.

Insufficient funding

China is developing fast economically, but teachers as a whole are still relatively underpaid. "The low incomes of English teachers drive them into taking a second or even a third teaching job" (Yu, 2000, p.196). As a result, "few university or secondary school teachers will spend time analysing learners' needs or designing their own syllabi, nor will they collect suitable materials to create communicative tasks and activities" (Leng, 1997, p. 39). In addition, CLT requires certain equipment and facilities to facilitate teaching, but they are not sufficient (Rao, 1996, p. 467). For instance, photocopying is not provided to teachers in China (with the exception of foreign teachers). Overhead projectors and computers are rare and are used for only a few demonstration classes.

“Money needs to be collected from the students, and if the students are unwilling to pay, teachers have to make do without the necessary materials” (Leng, 1997, p. 39). The lack of resources wastes teachers’ energy and time, making teaching preparation a painstaking process. As a result, it prevents teachers from appreciating the deserved value of CLT.

Lack of support

Teachers have had a lack of administrative, professional, or collegial support. Administrators usually guide teachers but they have no professional knowledge. Thus they may impose materials on teachers which are not communicative and do not conform to course goals and may include material in the examinations unrelated to the class. Teaching performances are evaluated by the administrators in terms of how well teachers speak English, how well they demonstrate the language items, how well they use the blackboard or other teaching realia, and how well they discipline students. How teachers use teaching methods and what teaching methods are used are largely ignored. When teachers have problems in using CLT, there are no colleagues to help because they too are unfamiliar with CLT.

Constraints Associated with CLT itself

The need to distinguish EFL and ESL

It is noticeable that EFL is very different from ESL (English as a second language). The most significant difference between EFL and ESL is the context of learning: in ESL situations, the target language is widely used outside the classroom “””””””” are. Other differences may include the purposes of learning English, teachers’ English proficiency and the availability of authentic English materials which are considered as one important characteristic in CLT. Therefore, introducing CLT from ESL context (e.g. England or US) into EFL context in China could be problematic. Li (2000) investigated the pedagogical communication problem between expatriate English language teachers and Chinese university English language majors. It is found that in transplanting Western educational models into Chinese classrooms, expatriate teachers had difficulties matching their discourse to the Chinese cultural of learning and therefore did not achieve the desired outcomes. Li (ibid.) concludes, “communication challenges become obvious when teaching methodologies developed in one educational context are exported to another educational context” (p. 275).

Lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments

It is a big problem for the teacher to conduct communicative evaluation because giving oral tests to so many students is very time-consuming. Teachers were used to traditional discrete-point testing of

grammar knowledge and found it disconcerting that there were no prescribed, ready-made assessment tools for communicative competence and that they would have to desire their own.

As a result of these factors outlined above, “many teachers have tried to change the dominant teaching procedures but quickly get frustrated, lose their initial enthusiasm, and acquiesce to tradition” (Campbell & Zhao, 1993, p.4). Therefore, CLT did not gain popularity in the early 1990s. The traditional concepts of language teaching still dominate teachers’ methodology where the teaching focus is still put on grammar and vocabulary. Speaking and listening tasks become superficial when the communicative aim is ignored. Teachers concluded that CLT is not feasible in China where there are so many situational constraints.

Measures Taken to Overcome Constraints

The SEDC supported teachers’ use of Communicative Language Teaching and from the mid-1990s has taken measures to ensure that the approach has been more widely and effectively adopted. These are outlined below.

Teacher Training

CLT needs skilled teachers. “CLT takes a better teacher to teach communicatively” (Rossner & Bolitho, 1990, p. 238). An ordinary teacher without enough knowledge and skills is not able to use CLT effectively. Medgyes (1986) argues, “The communicative classroom requires a teacher of extraordinary abilities: a multi-dimensional, high-tech, Wizard-of-Oz-like super-person – yet of flesh and blood.” CLT is especially difficult for non-native speakers of English because “the teacher needs to be more confidently competent in the foreign language” (ibid.). They have a heavier burden and need more time and energy to prepare lessons than native speakers. “By putting an especially heavy linguistic strain to the teacher, the communicative approach further reduces the time non-native teachers have available for their students” (ibid.).

It is not easy for Chinese teachers to use CLT. Based on the teaching experience in China, Hird (1995) concludes, “attempts to teach English communicatively in classrooms where resources are limited, class numbers are high, and changes are viewed with suspicion, would demand of the teacher an extraordinary level of expertise, together with sustained energy and enthusiasm” (p. 26).

Among the various constraints, teaching ability was most related to classroom teaching effectiveness and considered as a primary condition. If teachers have understood principles and

advantages of CLT, they will know how to use CLT, and be motivated to overcome difficulties. So the important thing that SEDC did was in the area of professional development. Many teachers had in-service training in secondary normal schools, normal colleges, teachers' colleges and normal universities. As a result, "the in-service courses are increasingly available in universities and colleges as the need for systematic training in current methodologies is widely recognized" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p.70).

In-service teacher course lasts from several days to one or two years. Teachers study part-time or full time or in a distant learning mode. Some also study for degrees. In these courses they learn knowledge and skills necessary for communicative teaching. Firstly, teachers learn to raise English proficiency, especially in speaking and listening. Secondly, teachers learn to understand the fundamental principles of CLT suggested by the new syllabus (SEDC, 1993, pp. 1-8), for example, English should be used in class, Audio-visual aids like realia, pictures, over-head transparencies, audio-tapes, videos, computers should be fully utilized. The teacher's role should be a facilitator and helper to guide students to develop effective learning habits.

Thirdly, they learn the target culture knowledge by understanding the new textbooks. "In the Chinese context, these textbooks offer considerable innovation in [teaching] methodology" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 68). *Junior English for China* contains such cultural knowledge as Western festivals, the world's population, the pyramids, American and British English, good manners in the West. *Senior English for China* contains such topics as Karl Marx, Bob Geldof, Disneyland and body language. Many teachers now recognize the importance to include cultural knowledge in teaching in order to develop learners' cultural competence.

Fourthly, teachers learn to use the Five-Stage Approach suggested by the textbooks. It can be used "for teaching new language points, vocabulary, structures and functions and may also be used for teaching of reading and listening skills" (Adams, 1994). The five stages are 1) revision, 2) presentation, 3) drilling, 4) practice, and 5) consolidation. This is something like the PPP procedure: the teacher first *presents* language items (e.g. language functions), then students *practice* and finally *produce* them in free activities. Among the five stages, practice (i.e. production) stage is important in which teachers provide opportunities for students to use language for communication. Activities include "pair work and group, acting and games" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) and activities of "information gap" and "transfer of information" (SEDC textbook, 1993).

Test Reform to Include Communicative Components

The MET test began to include communicative components. Beginning from the mid 1990s, the “language use section” was added to measure language skills used for communication. Earlier Li (1991) had suggested the reform on the testing contents: translation as a subtest was deleted; formal language usage (i.e. phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) was downgraded; and the applied and practice aspects of listening to dialogues and answering the questions, reading comprehension and compositions were increased in weighting. The MET has moved from an exclusive concern with language knowledge towards a test of students’ ability to use English for communication (Hird, 1995).

Publicity of the Advantages of Using CLT

The educational authorities publicized the advantages of using CLT. There are at least three advantages of using CLT in China. First, students will have better English proficiency for their search for jobs, entering higher institutions for further study either in China or abroad. Second, teachers will understand new trends in English teaching and catch up with new developments in the world. Third, as the largest population of EFL learners in the world, China not only needs various methods but also effective and efficient teaching methods.

As a result of these measures, more teachers have come to recognize the importance of CLT and came to accept CLT. In the mid-1990s, there was widespread awareness of more communicative approaches (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). By the late 1990s, CLT had become “a general direction in teaching and learning”, or a “principled communicative approach” (Gong, 1999, p. 16).

Discussion

From the study of constraints in China, we can draw some conclusions and implications.

Firstly, it seems that the constraints on the use of CLT in China are quite similar to those in other Asian countries. This shows that constraints exist in EFL countries. Teachers in EFL countries should establish or readjust the English teaching methods which are more suitable for the EFL contexts.

In order to find out difficulties in South Korea, Li (1998) used questionnaires and interviews to investigate 18 South Korean secondary school English teachers and found 15 constraints in four types: the teacher, the students, the educational system and CLT itself. So many were the

constraints that Li comments that “it is always more difficult than you plan and imagine” to introduce CLT in the classroom.

In Hong Kong, Lai’s investigation (1994) has identified three powerful constraints in the English language classroom which significantly affect the students’ involvement as well as their confidence level for participating in meaningful communication in class. They are low self-esteem, language anxiety, and the non-interactive patterns and inadequate opportunities for communication.

In Taiwan, Kuo (1995) used observation, interviewing and document collection as instruments to investigate CLT in the classroom. The study reveals that there is little congruence between the actual classroom teaching and the objectives required by the Ministry Education in Taiwan. Kuo concludes, “in order for a teaching approach to work in a specific cultural context, attention should be paid to students’ needs, teachers’ qualifications, and traditional customs and beliefs about language teaching and learning” (p. 21).

In Vietnam, a study (Ellis, 1994) investigated the experiences of three Australian teachers of ESL who conducted teacher workshops on CLT in Vietnam and identified class sizes, grammar-based examinations and lack of exposure to authentic language as constraints on using CLT.

In Japan, Sano et al (1984) reported that Japanese teachers often found communicative competence too distant a goal to aim at in the classroom because the students did not feel a pressing need to use English.

Secondly, constraints are powerful influences on teaching practice. Genesee and Upshur (1996) refer to constraints as ‘input factors’. They point out that “classroom teachers are seldom able to alter input factors since they fall outside their sphere of influence” (p. 37). So if there is a mismatch between an input factor (i.e. constraint) and the teacher’s practice, then certain aspect of practice must be altered to achieve greater compatibility. Thus, teachers must plan lessons according to the context and “classroom practice may be inconsistent with instructional plans because of the influence of input factors that make it difficult to implement plans as desired” (p. 43). Even if teachers like to use CLT, they still may not use it due to the strength of input factors, thus causing the discrepancy between attitude and practice, i.e. inconsistency between teachers’ willingness to use CLT and their inability to do so. Burnaby and Sun (1989) reported that “Chinese teachers had favorable views on CLT but felt that its applications were limited in light of the needs and purposes

of most Chinese students and that there were systematic constraints on its implementation in the Chinese educational system” (p. 231).

Although constraints are powerful, they can be overcome. The educational authorities like the SEDC play a big influence on EFL teaching. They helped teachers to overcome them and made CLT more acceptable by taking several effective measures such as teacher training and the reform of tests. The SEDC is the representative of the central government and is in a position to make educational policies which determine the goals, curriculum, course books, and even teaching methods throughout the country. Because of the highly centralized Chinese system of education, “this top-down intervention proved to be very effective in urging teachers to teach communicative in classrooms” (Yu, 2000, p. 195).

Thirdly, the findings about situational constraints can be used for improving teacher education programmes. Because constraints influence teaching, it is important for teachers to understand these and for teacher trainers to structure and improve teacher-training courses to take them into account. Teachers should not only raise English knowledge and teaching skills, but also know how to cope with situational constraints. Shih (1999, pp. 24-25) suggests several ways which may be useful to teacher education in China. For example,

Dealing with large classes. E.g. Teachers can rearrange the desks and chairs to leave room for various pair or group activities.

Motivating students to communicative. E.g. Teachers tell students that they have to develop communicative competence if they want to pass the test to enter universities for further study, want to go abroad, and want to find a good job with higher paid. The development of communicative competence can meet these needs.

Little time to prepare new materials. E.g. Tell the teachers that students respond positively to tasks that spark their interest and have relevance to them. Such activities prove more satisfying and interesting to teachers as well.

Fourthly, there are challenges for foreign teachers including New Zealand teachers working in China. According to Li (2000, p. 276), each year thousands of expatriate English-speaking teachers are involved in English teaching programmes in China. They contribute to the upgrading of

educational standards. However, “serious problems have arisen in the direct transference of Western teaching methods to Chinese classrooms” (ibid.). One of them is that Chinese students respond negatively to their teaching. Li’s identification of the possible sources reveals the cultural differences between the Western country and China which the foreign teachers did not take into account. The resolution of the problems, Li suggests, “lies in the establishment of a synergetic culture in which common interests are to be found and shared, sources of problems identified, cultural differences understood and respected, otherness transcended, and learning maximally enhanced” (p. 297).

Conclusion

The CLT innovation in China met many constraints at the beginning - difficulties caused by teachers, students, the educational system, CLT itself and financial limitations. These constraints are powerful and often out of the teachers’ control, thus causing the discrepancy between teachers’ attitude and classroom practice. To meet these challenges, the educational authorities took several measures, which include teacher re-training, test reform, issuing and publication of communicative syllabus and teaching materials. As a result the government authorities play a successful role in top-down interference into teaching methodology. Identification of situational constraints is important. Firstly, teacher education programmes should include such contents as how to overcome constraints in order to teach communicatively. Secondly, foreign teachers need to be fully aware of, and take into consideration, these constraints while teaching English in China. Thirdly, ESL teachers of Chinese students in countries like New Zealand need to be aware of the original context of learning, and the constraints which impinged upon their acquisition of English.

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