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Teaching English Communicatively in China - Educating Teachers is Not Enough.

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ABSTRACT

The extent to which the communicative language teaching approach is a relevant and viable methodology for English language teachers to use in China is an issue that has generated considerable interest in recent years. The conclusions drawn in this article are based on experiences of teaching in an in-service course for senior middle-school teachers of English in Hangzhou, China. The paper suggests that the communicative approach does have a role in English language teaching in China but that aspects of the approach need to be applied selectively and with caution. Some of the reasons for this stem from the nature of the approach itself while others are associated with both the past traditions and present circumstances of English language teaching and learning in China. The claim is made that while it is important to educate Chinese teachers of English in the use of communicative methodologies, significant changes to current practice will not occur as a result of this development in teacher education. It needs to be complemented by changes in the wider educational environment in China.

"TEACHING ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVELY IN CHINA - EDUCATING TEACHERS IS NOT ENOUGH"

The answer to the question, "How communicative can English language teaching be in China?" must be "not very", if by communicative English language teaching one is meaning that form of English teaching described in most of the TESOL methodology texts currently found in libraries of Western universities.

And maybe that is just as well because China is a vastly different English language teaching environment from the one that spawned and nurtured the communicative approach.

My students confronted me with the reality of the world of their middle schools as our course moved towards its conclusion and the prospect of returning to their schools after an absence of two years hit hard. I had taught them English literature using a very modest range of communicative techniques. They had gradually accepted my expectation that during classes there would be interaction with me through questions and responses and that we could use the textbooks according to our interests and priorities. They had become comfortable with small group discussion (with frequent code-switches between English and Chinese) and reporting back procedures using oral and written forms and posters and there had been a progressive acceptance by them of a concern for content and meaning rather than an exclusive focus on structure. For many of my students it had been a gentle introduction to a different style of English teaching/learning. My objectives in the course had been threefold, although the official brief was to teach English literature. As a native speaker, I saw my role also to contribute to the students' personal ability to use English in the informal oral area.

Lastly I naively hoped that some of the strategies I modelled in class would be added to their own classroom repertoires as senior middle school teachers of English.

However, in conversations with them, it became clear that they saw only limited possibilities for the use of Western methodology in their teaching. As I listened, I began to realise they were right. The reasons are of two types. Some are China-specific in that they relate to circumstances associated with past traditions and current practices of the Chinese education system. These will be examined later in this paper.

Current interpretation of the communicative approach

Other factors have to do with the nature of the communicative approach itself, or rather with the approach as it is being interpreted currently by many influential academics and foreign experts. Oral forms of communication have become highlighted at the expense of written. Somehow the communicative approach has been hijacked by those who see successful oral communication as the primary function of English language teaching. Several reasons for this development

have been proposed (Saville-Troike 1988, Dubin 1989, Whitley 1993) but an underlying factor appears to be the dependence in the current version of the communicative approach on an ESL environment. The enthusiasm of apologists for communicative teaching (as an antidote for traditional, structural approaches) inside the classroom has distracted them from an acknowledgment of the significance of the environment outside the classroom in learners' English development. In an ESL context the outside society constantly provides further "lessons" in authentic "practice" situations, especially in the oral interactive mode. The ESL learner has no way of avoiding them. On the other hand, the EFL learner has no way of engaging in them. There are almost no real life communicative target language needs for the EFL learner, especially in China. Even the best-intentioned New Year resolutions of my students to use only English in their dormitories and everyday dealings quickly evaporated. It is this essential suspension of reality by the EFL learner before an English language environment of "authenticity" can be created that has been suggested (Burnaby and Sun 1989) as a key impediment to the wholehearted adoption of communicative methods in English language teaching in China. Paradoxically the ESL context, which has allowed a narrow form of the communicative approach to become the accepted orthodoxy (Holliday 1994), provides a breadth of support and reinforcement for the English teacher that cannot be replicated in the EFL context in China. The ESL environment supplies countless ongoing models of appropriacy in language selection and use for the student whereas the teacher in China who is almost certain to be a non-native speaker of English is the single source of not only grammatical competence but also of both sociolinguistic and strategic competence (to use the Canale and Swain framework). It would be a remarkable person who could be an adequate teacher in all these areas in an EFL context. It is little wonder that the communicative approach has been slow to be popularised in the schools of China. This linguistic burden for non-native teachers is only one dimension of their new expanded role (Medgyes 1986) in the communicative approach.

Traditional Chinese teaching/learning styles

Also there is required a significant revision of traditional Chinese teaching styles. The Chinese tradition of language study focuses on a meticulous analysis in a textbook-based approach involving a systematic unlocking of the meaning of each fragment of language. Perfection is sought through a painstaking understanding of every language item. Personal creations and interpretations are not heavily promoted or valued. Care and certainty are favoured above quantity and experimentation. The principle of "learning sparingly but well" (Li, 1984) requires that output be constrained by the obligation to be error-free. Memorisation is a long established learning technique, especially in the language field. Teachers expect their students to receive rather than to construct learning and classroom relationships are based on distance and formality with a high degree of teacher-centredness. Chinese senior middle school teachers appear heavily aware of a personal responsibility for their students' fortunes in English courses.

However the communicative language teaching approach proceeds in quite different ways. Language use rather than language knowledge is emphasised with a consequent diminution of emphasis on grammatical forms. More attention is given to fluency and appropriacy than to structural correctness. Classroom communicative exercises depend upon spontaneity and trial-and-error from learners and approximations as interim forms are encouraged. The communicative approach promotes interpersonal rather than intrapersonal interaction and favours "conspicuous action and spontaneous response" (Tarvin and Al-Arishi 1991) to the extent that the reflective, non-impulsive students can be penalised. The teacher in the communicative classroom oscillates between roles of facilitation and direct transmission and sets an environment that is interactive and not excessively formal.

Clearly these practices require significant adjustments to traditional Chinese styles of language learning. Any changes needing to be effected will need to be implemented slowly and with sensitivity in the development of a communicative approach "with Chinese characteristics". Compromises will need to be reached. For example, the most successful instance of informal small group oral negotiation that occurred in my teaching in China involved sustained incidental discussion (in English) in a group debating whether "which" or "that" was correct in a particular sentence.

China-specific factors that affect implementation of communicative approaches

The second set of reasons which limit a full-on application of the communicative approach to the Chinese context are those which are specific to realities of the current education system in China.

National examination system

The highly centralised national examination system is cited frequently as a powerful impediment to change in educational practices in China. The national Matriculation English Test clearly exerts a significant influence on English teaching and any move towards a communicative methodology must be judged in the light of how well it equips students to be successful in the test. Similarly any departure from the use of the official national textbooks which service the MET syllabus can expose English teachers to the danger of disadvantaging their students in the examination. It is no surprise that the national examination system has been identified (for example, Anderson 1993, Campbell & Yong, 1993) as the single most powerful influence in the resistance to innovation in educational practice in China.

However this view ignores changes that have occurred in recent years in the English language subject of the national matriculation examinations. Li (1991) records the revisions to the content of the MET examination since its inception in 1984. Translation as a subtest has been deleted. The formal linguistic knowledge dimensions of English (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar), although still significant, have been downgraded and the applied and practice aspects of reading, writing and speaking have been increased in weighting. The MET has moved increasingly from an exclusive concern with knowledge about English towards a test of students' ability to use the language. Li provides encouraging evidence that there has been a washback effect on the activities and content of English lessons in middle schools and in the range of English language materials used both in and outside the classroom. The decision to have Shanghai and three other provinces experiment with the publication of their own set of textbooks is another instance of promising diversity in the English language field. It is also significant that Shanghai is now able to set its own English matriculation examination. In many parts of China students are by-passing the MET examination as they opt for non-university training/jobs which require success in provincially-set English language examinations. While it is important not to overstate the extent of the reduction, there are signs that the rigidity exercised on English teaching by China's national examination system is diminishing.

Teacher-related factors

What appears to be a more significant influence on the way English is taught is the impact the educational policy of China has on the teaching profession, and on teachers of English in particular. Currently there is a morale problem in the ranks of middle school teachers of English. Salaries remain at a low level and teachers are obliged to "moonlight" with second jobs to augment their incomes. Teachers of English feel an extra resentment in that English language skills are highly prized outside teaching.

For those Chinese with ability in English language there are exciting opportunities in business, trade, interpreting, law and tourism. On the other hand English teaching offers few attractions or rewards even for well qualified teachers. The promotion system is still heavily based on seniority and staffing procedures make movement between schools both within regions and between rural and urban areas cumbersome and difficult. Any enthusiastic teacher of English would find it difficult to escape from a non-supportive department head. The level of training of teachers, especially in rural areas, is still not uniformly high. The recruitment of English teachers follows the job assignment system where unwilling graduates are allocated to English teaching according to provincial need.

This then is the profile of China's middle school teachers of English. The odds against them appear to be overwhelming. To change classroom practices and teach English communicatively would require a huge commitment. The logistics of what would be perceived as working against learner's expectations and causing disruption for other subject teachers have been well documented (Nolasco & Arthur 1986, White 1989).

Most innovations in education make considerable demands on those at the forefront of classrooms; the teachers. Any education system has its inertia of self-perpetuation. China is no different. Attempts to teach English communicatively in classrooms where resources are limited, class numbers are high, and changes are viewed with suspicion would involve an extraordinary level of expertise with sustained energy and enthusiasm from the teacher.

Implications for future

The future of communicative teaching in China needs to acknowledge the investment required in the education (in the broadest sense) of Chinese teachers of English. It is not only their professional language-specific preparation that requires to be addressed but also the associated national educational policy directions that affect industrial matters such as their recruitment, promotion and working conditions. Imported, allegedly universal Western teaching methodologies that dismiss the local context are unlikely to flourish. Young (1987) may well be correct when he argues that educational change of any permanent consequence can be achieved only through culturally responsive reform and that externally imposed, bureaucratically-efficient methods often fail. There is obvious strength in his view that any successful application of a communicative approach to English teaching in China needs to be predicated on a careful (and inevitably slow) ethnographic analysis of the Chinese classroom context.

However, the external bureaucratic Chinese education system also forms part of the local context for Chinese middle school teachers of English and hence cannot be ignored. There are several aspects of the education system that impinge on the way teachers in China teach English and these need responses and action before English can be taught communicatively in China. These aspects are practical and industrial as well as academic. Progress has been made, especially in the national examination system, but much remains to be done.

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TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION: USING MULTIMEDIA TO ENHANCE THE DESIGN AND MAKE PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the use of a multimedia journal to enhance a subject in technology education. The subject was delivered to preservice teachers studying to be primary school teachers. The multimedia journal was used to assist in the delivery of the subject and to record the progress made by students. It is argued that multimedia used in this manner complements and extends upon the teaching program and becomes an integral part of the learning process

INTRODUCTION

This study discusses the development and evaluation of a new subject in technology education, and demonstrates how a multimedia journal can be used to assist preservice teachers to further their understanding of the design and make process.

The movement toward national curricula in the United Kingdom and Australia stimulated interest in the development of national attainments that relate stages of maturity to chronological age (DES, 1985; Curriculum Corporation, 1994). This movement also revitalize interest in improving science and technology-related primary school education in Australia and the United Kingdom (U.K) (D.E.S., 1985; Australian Academy of Science, 1991). Whilst educational planners may be politically obligated to produce new primary school science and technology curricula that include tables displaying age-related attainments, they are also morally obligated to provide much more than this . To just provide teachers with written documentation and the occasional one-off professional development courses is not good enough and reflects an outmoded model of professional development (Renner,1990). As Ingvarson (1987) has stated " a few thousand dollars for a one-off inservice which could only be given to a fraction of the teachers..is crazy" (p.15). More consideration needs to be given to other means of providing inservice and preservice training of teachers. In the area of technology education relevant preservice experiences are very important and this paper outlines an attempt to employ multimedia to complement and extend the design, make and appraise process with preservice teachers.

An overview of the state of technology education in primary schools in the UK and Australia

In 1988 a centralised National Curriculum was established in the U.K. and teachers were required by law to implement strategies that would achieve attainments related to specified ages. However such legislation does not guarantee that new practices will transfer into the classroom, and Carter and Carré (1990, 1991) report that only 34% of primary teachers from a sample of 901 felt independently competent to help children fulfill syllabus goals in science and technology. Responses from this survey and previous work in 1989 (Wragg, Bennett and Carré) found that 60% of respondents were in need of in-service help. A similar study conducted in New South Wales (Ferry, 1993) showed that only 50% of teachers had taught design and make units, and 80% needed assistance in planning, implementing and evaluating units that related to designing and making. Analysis of interview data from this study showed that teachers were reluctant to teach designing and making because they had little or no experience with the processes involved.

The Australian findings are of concern as the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Science Teachers Association recommended in 1991 that science and technology become an integral part of primary school experience for all Australian children (Australian Academy of Science, 1991). Furthermore, these groups recommended that primary school teachers should have the opportunity to develop the competence, confidence and enthusiasm needed to provide an environment in which their students can learn both the content and processes of science and technology.

It is appropriate to question whether technology education could suffer the same fate as science