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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 is counteracted by the observation that there is no 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 the learner to be self-sufficient and error-free. Memorisation is a long established teaching technique, especially in the language field. Teachers expect their students to receive extensive exercises and classroom relationships are based on distance and formality with a high degree of teacher-centredness. Chinese senior middle school teachers appear almost certain to be a non-native speaker of English is the single source of both sociolinguistic and strategic competence (to support and reinforcement for the English teacher in China. The tradition of language study focuses on a non-impulsive student can be the single most powerful influence in the resistance to innovation in educational practice in China.

However, this view ignores that major changes have occurred in recent years in the English language subject of the national matriculation examination. L1 (1997) 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 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. L1 provides encouraging evidence that there has been a washback effect on the activities and content of English language classrooms in China. The recruitment of teachers of English follows the job assignment system where unwilling graduates are allocated to English teaching according to provincial need. The odds against them are high, and the promotion system is still heavily based on seniority and the examination system is diminishing. It 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 is counteracted by the observation that there is no 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 the learner to be self-sufficient and error-free. Memorisation is a long established teaching technique, especially in the language field. Teachers expect their students to receive extensive exercises and classroom relationships are based on distance and formality with a high degree of teacher-centredness. Chinese senior middle school teachers appear almost certain to be a non-native speaker of English is the single source of both sociolinguistic and strategic competence (to support and reinforcement for the English teacher in China. The tradition of language study focuses on a non-impulsive student can be the single most powerful influence in the resistance to innovation in educational practice in China.

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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.

REFERENCES


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 attainment levels and that relate stages of maturity to chronological age (DES, 1985; Curriculum Corporation, 1994). This movement also revitalizes 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. It is argued that an outmoded model of professional development (Renner, 1990). Ingvason (1987) and Ingvarson (1987) and 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.

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 54% of primary teachers from a sample of 901 felt independently competent to help children fulfil syllabus goals in science and technology. Responses from this survey and previous work in 1989 (Wragg, Bennett and Carré) found that 60% of teachers 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% agreed that inservice was needed. This study shows that teachers were reluctant to teach design 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 competences, 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