

While existing test designs are being improved, organized efforts have been directed to alternative, more task-based test designs guided by contemporary language testing theories. Unlike the earlier tests, these new tests give due attention to speaking and writing. They are designed with a view to promoting learning. Formative assessment has been a means of teaching for many experienced language teachers over the years, but little research has been conducted on formative assessment in China and abroad. There seems a need for such research to complement language testing.

RESEARCH

All the trends outlined above, however immature or robust, must depend upon systematic research and informed practice to sustain and bloom. To upgrade ELT in China and to contribute to the TESOL field, China will need to organize nationwide research teams in each of the subareas of study and to draw on international expertise. Initial efforts are being made toward this end.

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Communicative Language Teaching in China: Progress and Resistance

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■ It has been more than two decades since the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach was introduced to the Chinese foreign language community, affecting tens of millions of Chinese learners of

English. In an arena previously dominated by the grammar-translation approach, these 20 years have witnessed profound changes in foreign language teaching. However, a variety of constraints have inhibited the adoption of CLT in China.

PROGRESS

Efforts to adopt CLT in China can be traced back to the work of Li Xiaojun and her associates, who compiled *Communicative English for Chinese Learners*, a series of communicative English textbooks, in 1979. In 1984, Li published "In Defense of the Communicative Approach," the first article published in *ELT Journal* in support of CLT. Li claimed that "language is communication, and learning a language is learning to communicate" (p. 2). This article profoundly affected Chinese teachers' attitudes toward CLT and spawned several projects that integrated topics relevant to Chinese students with common communicative expressions as well as grammatical structures.

The call for the adoption of CLT was not accidental. It came as a response to discontent with the traditional grammar-translation method. In this teaching method, classroom teachers focused on grammar and structure, which produced unsatisfactory results. Students had little ability to speak and understand English (Ng & Tang, 1997).

However, it was not until the early 1990s that substantial progress was made in applying CLT to teaching practice in China. In 1992 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) replaced the 1981 structure-based national unified syllabus with a new one that set communication as the teaching aim. The 1992 syllabus called for training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing to enable students to "gain basic knowledge of English and competence to use English for communication" (SEDC, 1992, p. 1).

As Liao (2000) has pointed out, the SEDC, as the representative of the central government, is in a position to make educational policies and determine the goals, curriculum, course books, and even teaching methods throughout the country. Due to the highly centralized Chinese system of education, this top-down intervention proved to be very effective in urging teachers to teach communicatively in classrooms. By the mid-1990s, CLT had become "a general approach in teaching and learning," or "a principled communicative approach" (Gong, 1999, p. 116).

RESISTANCE

At the very outset, however, the application of CLT was constrained by various factors. Consequently, although CLT was introduced in the late

1970s, “87% of teachers in China’s middle schools used the traditional method in the late 1980’s” (Zuo et al., 1990, p. 40). Even now, a number of educators, researchers, and practitioners in the Chinese foreign language teaching community are skeptical as to whether CLT is really superior to the traditional analytical approach. Wang (1999) has reported on a 5-year (1993–1998) longitudinal case study undertaken at East China Teachers’ University, which tests the “communicative method’ against the analytical” (p. 37). The experimental classes used the communicative-oriented course book developed by Li Xiaojun while the control classes used textbooks whose approach was considered traditional and analytical. According to Wang, the results of this study show that “both the experimental and the analytical classes have strengths and weaknesses” (p. 37). Thus the study concluded that both the communicative method and the analytical method should be practiced in foreign language classrooms.

For all its merits, this study as reported in Wang (1999) seems to represent a retrogression in the CLT movement in China. CLT as a theory and as a method, which treats language as communication, is well established. As far back as 1983, Stern noted that, unlike the six most influential language teaching methods (i.e., the grammar-translation, audiolingual, direct, reading, and audiovisual methods, and cognitive theory), CLT does not treat language learning as code learning. It explores “the possibility of non-analytical, participatory, or experiential ways of language learning as a deliberate teaching strategy” (p. 473). Stern thus concluded that because all the old methods “tend to place over-emphasis on single aspects as the central issue of teaching and learning, none of them are adequate” (p. 473). In my opinion, the research efforts of the East China Teachers’ University study would have been more productive if the researchers had sought to incorporate some elements of the traditional analytical method into CLT to suit the specific needs of Chinese foreign language classrooms.

CONSTRAINING FACTORS

Current circumstances in China impose many constraints on CLT. Economically speaking, the low incomes of English teachers drive them into taking a second or even a third teaching job. “Consequently, few university or secondary school teachers will spend time analyzing learners’ needs or designing their own syllabi, nor will they collect suitable materials to create communicative tasks and activities” (Hui, 1997, p. 38). In addition, classrooms with 60 students are too crowded for learner-centered teaching. Culturally, due to the pervasive influence of Confucian ideas, “teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. If teachers do not display their knowledge in lectures, or if they play games with

students or ask students to role-play in class, then they are not doing their job!” (p. 38).

But the most important constraint comes from the lack of qualified English teachers. A qualified English teacher should, in the first place, be capable in all four skills. But out of 550,000 middle school teachers in China, only 89.4% of junior middle school teachers and 55.0% of senior middle school teachers are professionally qualified (Liu & Gong, 2000). Quite a number of teachers know only some basic English grammar and vocabulary. For them the grammar-translation method is the most acceptable because they can basically teach English in Chinese.

Moreover, qualified English teachers should be familiar with theories of linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy. A sound knowledge of these theories will support the use of creative CLT in class and help teachers understand the new curriculum and new CLT textbooks. Motivated by the value of CLT, classroom teachers may be encouraged to overcome the existing constraints on CLT in China.

CONCLUSION

To adopt the relatively new CLT approach in China inevitably involves transforming the traditional analytic grammar-translation approach, which is no easy task. Current national structures and educational systems are subject to traditions and legislation as well as various attitudes toward CLT. As Xiao (1998) has pointed out, “the inefficient grammar-translation approach is continually reinforced. When some of the students who have been taught with the grammar-translation method turn out to be English teachers, they are most likely to use the same method in their teaching” (p. 28). To fundamentally change the situation, teachers must undergo training that will promote their theoretical awareness as well as their linguistic abilities.

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