



Contextual Considerations for Communicative Language Teaching Adoption: A Case Study of China

Samar Alharbi

School of Modern Languages & Linguistics,
Southampton University Southampton, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of the main argument raised by Liao (2004) regarding the adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Chinese context. The author discusses the critical argument made by other researchers regarding CLT and emphasises the significance of considering the teaching context. The conclusion section of the research article is also summarized, highlighting the challenges associated with implementing CLT in China and the proposed solutions. The paper suggests that CLT, being a Western approach, may not be suitable for adoption in China due to the lack of contextual consideration. It further examines the difficulties faced by teachers in conducting a needs analysis and implementing the proposed context approach. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for further research and training to improve CLT practices in Chinese classrooms and raises broader questions about the applicability of these solutions in other teaching contexts, such as Saudi Arabia. The research paper addresses important issues related to CLT adoption as an education policy decision and offers potential insights for improving language teaching practices.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, CLT adoption, teaching context, China, contextual analysis, education policy.

INTRODUCTION

In his research article, Liao (2004) raises a main argument relating to communicative language teaching (CLT) adoption in the Chinese context. He makes reference to a critical argument made by other researchers about CLT and the importance of considering the teaching context. From this perspective, it can be argued that CLT is not suitable for adoption in China because it is essentially a western approach that does not take the context of China into account. For example, Bax (2003) contended that CLT should be replaced with 'a context approach', and he affirmed that a teaching method could not be imported from one context to another; instead, the chosen method should be suitable for teachers and learners in a particular teaching context. This position is known as 'relativism' (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 182) and it refers to the belief that a method is not appropriate for all teaching contexts – one method might be more relevant to a particular context than another. Despite the importance of considering the teaching context when implementing CLT, Liao argued that CLT is indeed the best approach to be implemented in China, based on the Larsen-Freeman (2000: 182) notion of 'absolutism'. This supports the government's position of adopting CLT in most schools in China due to its advantages with regard to promoting communicative competence among students. Although CLT is a

predominantly western teaching approach and its benefits have been proved in many English teaching classrooms, this does not mean that it is applicable to all teaching contexts. I believe that other considerations should be taken into account when implementing CLT, such as culture, teachers' and learners' beliefs and expectations, and the classroom context, including textbooks and class time. The aim of this paper is to discuss CLT practices in relation to the teaching and learning context and culture. It also demonstrates some constraints on implementing CLT in China and it offers some solutions for the challenges raised. The following section presents a brief discussion about the importance of cultural teaching practices when adopting CLT.

CLT AND CULTURE

The context and classroom environment always influences teaching and learning practices. Teachers are always influenced by their teaching context, so they utilize an appropriate method that suits the students and their learning needs. In the Saudi context, for example, teachers follow the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods. Their teaching context determines their choice of these methods. Students are expected to produce accurate oral and written language, free from mistakes. Alamri (2018) claims that context is equally important as communication in teaching. To achieve the teaching objectives, the teacher should consider the classroom context, including the textbook, students, learning environment and culture.

Culture is a broader belief about what is and is not culturally appropriate in a particular context. For teaching and learning, different cultures have different views about these practices. In the Chinese culture, education is very valued, and it is viewed as a power capable of turning an ordinary person into a more superior one and a weak community into a strong one (Hu, 2010). For teaching practices, education has been traditionally perceived as accumulative knowledge that students passively receive and use later on, rather than being for immediate purposes (Hu, 2002). Based on Chinese beliefs about education and teaching, teachers need to adopt a method that fulfils the aims of the learning context and meets students' needs and expectations.

Culture and context play an important role in the success of the learning process and they are important factors when considering the choice of a teaching approach. To clarify, Li (2003), for example, explained the influence of culture on language learning experiences. In his study, Li investigated Asia students' learning experiences of studying in two New Zealand English language schools. The study's results revealed that Asian students had negative learning experiences related to teacher quality, teaching approaches, course content and teaching materials. In addition, the findings indicated that some teachers' adoption of CLT or interactive teaching contributed to this negative learning experience. Most students reported that the teachers were not serious enough as they regularly organized games to play, which they considered were not important for their language acquisition, and that hence their learning needs were neglected. It is obvious that Asian students were influenced by their culture and they viewed education as a serious learning process and they "tend to associate games and communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are skeptical of their use as learning tools" (Rao, 1996: 467).

Although CLT has been proven to be an inappropriate method in China due to its inapplicability to the Chinese culture and teaching context (Liao, 2004), other western methods are adopted successfully in Chinese classrooms when they fit the traditional view of learning in Chinese

culture (ibid). For example, the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods primarily focus on the accurate production of the language, translation, drilling and repeating, and memorisation of information for later use, such as in exams and homework. The primary purpose of teaching and learning English is centred on linguistic knowledge and the mastery of language forms and structure (Hu, 2002). It is evident that some CLT principles, such as student-centred learning, tolerance of errors, fluency and a focus on functional language (Brumfit, 2001) are incompatible with the traditional teaching practices in a Chinese environment. However, recently the Chinese government's educational policies have initiated a reform of the school syllabus, focusing on teaching communicative competence as an ultimate pedagogic goal in language classrooms (Hu, 2010). Nevertheless, the adoption of CLT practices in the Chinese context does not achieve the desired results (Hu, 2010). The following section demonstrates some obstacles to implementing CLT in the Chinese context and it offers some practical solutions to making CLT a possible teaching approach in China.

CLT ADOPTION IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Difficulties with Adopting CLT in the Chinese Context

There are some constraints on adopting CLT in Chinese classrooms. One of the challenges is that some Chinese English language teachers are not proficient in English so they cannot design communicative activities that require creativity or answer any spontaneous questions that might arise from implementing such activities (Gulnaz, Alfaqih and Mashhour, 2015). Also, these types of communicative activities require time and preparation, which most teachers lack as they need to follow the textbook syllabus. Teachers in China do not have the autonomy to choose their own teaching materials. In fact, they need to follow a prescribed syllabus and follow an ideological approach that best fits the context they are teaching in. Classroom sizes and the number of students is another situational constraint for the effective use of CLT (Ning, 2011). The classroom structure might not support pair or group work and the large number of students in each class leaves no room for practising free interactive activities.

Among other challenges involved in the adoption of CLT in the Chinese context is the fact that the tradition approach, which many teachers follow, conflicts with CLT teaching practices (Rao, 1996). In other words, most students perceive learning English as memorizing sentence structures and many words and being able to recite most of the textbook. There is a tendency among students to avoid language ambiguity, strive to understand most of the textbook content, and perform well in exams (Hu, 2010). The teacher's role is to deliver the coursebook content, and the students' role is to consume the knowledge. This type of teacher role dominates in Chinese classrooms; the passive students and the intolerance of errors conflict with CLT principles, which view language learning as student-centred. In CLT, the teacher's role is to facilitate learning by promoting student interactions, using communicative learning activities that focus on function and meaning (Brumfit, 2001). Littlewood (1981) pointed out that the main goal of teaching a foreign language is 'to extend the range of communication situations in which the learner can perform with focus on meaning, without being hindered by the attention he must pay to linguistic form' (p.89). Like the Chinese context, in Saudi Arabia, English language teachers follow the traditional teaching approach that heavily emphasises accuracy in oral and written language and neglects fluency. Farooq (2015) confirmed that the local context influenced the teaching approaches followed by most of teachers in Saudi Arabia. According to Farooq, most teachers reported that they were aware of the characteristics of CLT and the importance of communicative competence, but they believed that complete adoption

of CLT would not achieve the desired results. This was because of several relevant challenges, such as textbook syllabus, crowded classrooms, inadequate teaching facilities and students' low level of proficiency. Thus, CLT is not considered to be a suitable approach in the Saudi context as it faces similar obstacles to those mentioned in the adoption of CLT in the Chinese context. Considering the challenges involved in implementing CLT in different contexts, one can argue that implementing CLT is pedagogically necessary but problematic at the same time. Consequently, in order to maximize the benefits of CLT practices in English language classrooms, Chinese teachers could adopt CLT and implement only the practices that fit well with their teaching context. The following section presents some solutions for combining CLT practices with the Chinese knowledge-oriented traditional approach.

Solutions for Adopting CLT in the Chinese Context

Although CLT faces some obstacles in the Chinese classroom context, the Chinese government wishes to improve students' communication competence. Liao (2004) argued that if teachers are aware of the difficulties that prevent them from adopting CLT, such as large classes and exam systems that are based on grammar, they are likely to be able to overcome these difficulties.

School administrative can reduce the number of students in each class so that communicative activities like pair and group work are possible. Teachers should plan lessons and use textbook materials to create more collaborative tasks opportunities that make students active participants in the learning process and improve their communication skills. Teachers can also give equal balance to fluency and accuracy. For example, the implicit teaching of grammar rules and a focus on function would allow students to discover grammar rules and to practise these rules by using them in real-life communication. Swan (1985) also advocated giving equal balance to form and meaning and he criticised CLT's prioritization of language function at the expense of understanding the language structure as this might create a gap in knowledge regarding the language structure of the target language.

Educational administrators have an important role in the promotion of the CLT environment in schools and universities. They should arrange professional development training programmes in order to train teachers on how to develop a CLT environment (Liao, 2004). Curriculum designers may redesign the course syllabus and develop the curriculum by integrating context into communicative language activities that promote communicative competence in students.

CONCLUSION

Communicative language teaching is the dominant teaching approach across many education institutes around the world. It views language as a vehicle to promote meaningful communication, thus its primary focus is the fluency and fluidity of communication between speakers. The main principles of CLT focus on meaning and function at the first stage of learning a language (Brumfit, 2001). However, this might conflict with other teaching and learning aspects and beliefs in other contexts. Bax (2003) argued that there is no perfect method for teaching and learning and that it is necessary to consider a context approach. However, his proposal for a context approach that is designed to overcome difficulties with CLT has created more challenges for teachers in China (Liao, 2004). Teachers need to conduct a needs analysis in order to identify the most appropriate approach, but this is difficult as teachers lack the knowledge and time to perform such an analysis. They would therefore need to be trained

on contextual analysis and when it is needed (Liao, 2004). In addition, the context approach is an 'eclectic approach' with no clear procedures or design; hence, it is difficult for teachers to follow (Liao, 2004).

This article raises an important issue related to adopting CLT as an education policy decision in the Chinese context. It also highlights some aspects that need to be considered to improve CLT practices in Chinese classrooms. The author's argument about CLT's applicability in the Chinese context could also raise an important question: what about other teaching contexts? Can the solutions the author and other researchers offer to improve CLT practices be applied in other teaching contexts? From my teaching experience, Saudi Arabia, like China, faces the same challenges, so the solutions offered in this paper could work in the Saudi context.

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