

## READERS RESPOND (2)

# The need for Communicative Language Teaching in China

*Xiaoqing Liao*

Stephen Bax's (2003) argument for 'teaching in accordance to specific contexts' is very similar to that of some other researchers (e.g. Holliday 1994) who have warned that a method cannot easily be exported from one context to another. Larsen-Freeman (2000: 182) has called this position 'relativism'. The relativists argue that a method is not equally suited to all contexts, and that different methods suit different teachers and students in different contexts. Based on this argument, someone may argue that since China has its own special teaching context, Chinese teachers should not adopt western CLT. However, this is not a view I share. My position is what Larsen-Freeman (2000: 182) called 'absolutism'—CLT is best for China.

### **The adoption of CLT is the Chinese government's position**

The State Education Development Commission (SEDC) is the official authority for setting educational policy. It is the representative of the highly centralized Chinese system of education. In 1992 SEDC introduced a teaching syllabus, and required that secondary school teachers teach English 'for communication'. At the same time the People's Education Press compiled a textbook series for secondary school English learners. The aims of the textbooks were to help students develop all-round ability in the four language skills, and an ability to use English for communication. In 2001 SEDC required all secondary school teachers to use task-based language teaching, and the relevant task-based textbooks have since been introduced in some schools.

The Chinese government feels that the use of CLT will be advantageous to China. By introducing CLT, teachers can keep up with developments in English teaching methods outside China. If not, teachers will return to the traditional way of teaching, where the process of language learning is reduced to the mere mastery of grammar and vocabulary. In addition, introducing CLT will assist learners to develop greater competence in the use of English for communication. They will no longer be 'communicatively incompetent'.

In many EFL countries in Asia, ministries of education have based teaching objectives on the general goal of developing communicative abilities. According to Kuo (1995), in Taiwan,

[The teaching] objectives appear to call for the ability to communicate in English. Therefore, adopting the communicative approach seems to be desperately needed in order for these objectives to be met.

In Japan, the Ministry of Education proposed a curriculum innovation in 1987.

The proposal was for a shift away from long established grammar-translation curriculum content and classroom practices, towards teaching for communication and communicative competence. (Lamie 2001: xv)

There is one argument that is against the adoption of CLT in China. This is that teachers in China should be assisted to develop a methodology appropriate to their specific teaching contexts, and should not adopt an imported methodology such as CLT.

However, the notion that teachers should be free to develop their own 'appropriate methodologies' is itself a culturally relative one. That is, it belongs to an educational system where teachers are allowed a fair degree of autonomy of choice. Such a system can be found in many countries in Western Europe and North America. However, China does not have such a system. In China the educational system is centrally controlled, with the government specifying both the content and methodology of teaching. In the case of English, the government has required teachers to adopt CLT. Thus, arguably, in the context of China, what is appropriate is for teachers to teach in accordance with government requirements. The question as to what is or is not 'appropriate' can only be answered by reference to the specific context of teaching, and in the case of China this is a context that is regulated top-down by government. Thus, for China it can be argued that what is 'appropriate' is that teachers should adopt CLT.

### **Difficulties can be overcome**

It is clear that difficulties caused by the situational constraints (e.g. large class size and grammar-based tests) will inhibit the adoption of CLT. However, if teachers are aware of situational constraints, any difficulties can be overcome.

In a case study (Liao 2003), a secondary school teacher, Ms Huang, used CLT successfully. The questionnaire and the post-class interview showed that she held favourable attitudes towards CLT, had a clear and correct understanding of CLT, and the professional ability to overcome situational constraints (e.g. large class size). In the observed class (with 50 students), Huang used the mandatory function-based textbook, and focused on such functions as asking for time, asking for help, and expressing thanks. Using a classroom coding sheet to analyse Huang's method, Liao determined that this class had communicative features (e.g. teaching functional language, pair/group work, and communicative activities).

Nowadays more and more Chinese teachers enter teachers' universities and colleges for professional training. In addition, constraints can also be addressed by educational authorities. For example, the textbook contents can be changed in order to include more communicative components.

Large classes can also be reduced, and more teachers hired, if the government puts more funds into these measures. Of course, this process of change will inevitably be gradual.

### **How about Chinese teaching methods?**

In the recent history of English language teaching in China, most teachers have used such western methods as the ‘grammar-translation method’, the ‘direct method’, and the ‘audiolingual method’. Although some ‘methods’ have been created by Chinese people, they are not really methods at all. For example, the ‘Zhang Sizhong Method’ is a collection of personal teaching experiences; it has no ‘approach’ and no ‘design’, as defined by Richards and Rodgers (2001). Ironically, this ‘method’ is also western, as one of its main teaching principles—that is, reading original books—came from the grammar-translation method (see Liao 2003).

### **Context approach**

Bax suggests that teachers use what he called the ‘context approach’. The procedure is that teachers first conduct a needs analysis and then identify a suitable approach. Unfortunately, this is not practical in China.

Firstly, not every Chinese school teacher has enough knowledge and time to conduct a needs analysis that is reliable and valid; nor does he/she know how to choose an ‘appropriate’ method. Even if the teachers are able to do these, they may be unwilling to do so because they have the well-established CLT (which contains approach, method, and procedure) to hand, and because they like to use CLT. Secondly, because the context approach is new, teachers need to be re-trained to develop contextual awareness and context analysis skills. China has about 500,000 secondary school EFL teachers and 1.5 million primary school teachers. Nobody knows how many years it will take to re-train so many teachers. Nobody knows whether the government will support this kind of teacher education. Thirdly, the context approach is an eclectic approach. It is only an ‘approach’ rather than a ‘method’ (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Because it has no ‘design’ or ‘procedure’, it is very hard for teachers to follow.

Of course, the learning context (e.g. learner variables) is a key factor in successful language learning, but CLT does not preclude the teacher’s role as a needs analyst and a facilitator of learning.

### **Conclusion**

The adoption of CLT is the government’s position and application of CLT will bring about a positive effect on English teaching and learning. The western notion of ‘relativism’ does not work in China. 

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## The author

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**Xiaoqing Liao** obtained his PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The idea of this article comes from his PhD thesis: Chinese Secondary School EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards Communicative Language Teaching and their Classroom Practice. He is now an assistant professor in Shih Chien University, Taiwan.

**Email:** xqliao@wxc.net.nz