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Yi Lin

Southeast University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China, princessgrape@qq.com

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Culturally Responsive Communicative Teaching (CRCLT): A New Alternative for EFL Teachers in China and Other Non-English Speaking Countries

Yi Lin (Southeast University, Nanjing China)

Abstract

This paper proposes Culturally Responsive Communicative Teaching (CRCLT) as an innovative, alternative approach to meeting the specific cultural contexts and individual students' needs in non-English-speaking countries. The paper not only contains a comprehensive theoretical framework of the proposed approach, but also offers practical recommendations based on the author's reading of the literature and professional experience as an EFL teacher in China. The author believes such a study will contribute to EFL teachers' knowledge of a promising approach which can be adapted to specific cultural contexts and encourage more exploration for new alternatives in teaching EFL in non-English-speaking countries.

Résumé

Cet article propose une approche éducative innovante et alternative appelée « Enseignement Communicatif Sensible au Contexte Culturel » qui cherche à répondre aux besoins contextuels et culturels spécifiques des étudiants de pays non anglophones. Il expose un cadre de référence théorique complet sur l'approche éducative proposée, tout en proposant des recommandations d'ordre pratiques basées sur les lectures et l'expérience professionnelle de l'auteur en tant que professeur d'anglais en Chine. L'auteur pense que cette étude, applicable à des contextes culturels spécifiques, contribuera au monde de l'enseignement de l'anglais et qu'il encouragera de ce fait l'exploration d'autres alternatives pour l'enseignement de l'anglais dans des pays non anglophones.

BACKGROUND

This paper evolved from the experience I had with one of my students four years ago. I remember the year of 2001 very well as it was my first year of teaching. I was teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a renowned international school in China where most EFL teachers were enthusiastic about the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT). Like my colleagues, I made every effort to engage my students in a variety of communicative activities and immersed them in the English language and Western culture to the greatest extent possible. However, my efforts seemed to have little effect on a girl named Chun, who had just been transferred into my class the previous month. My implementation of communicative activities such as role-play, presentation and pair-work did not attract her attention as expected and she appeared reluctant to learn about Western culture in class. I believed then that her reluctance was mainly due to her low English proficiency and the lack of self-confidence. Therefore, I helped her with her English after class and had one model student be her partner who made sure that Chun could participate in every in-class activity.

As a result, half a year later, she became accustomed to our school system and behaved like the other students in the EFL classroom. During my three years of teaching, I came across at least four students like Chun. They all came from small towns and their parents spent considerable money to transfer them into our school to improve their English and to broaden their views. I seldom doubted the legitimacy of requiring them to engage in CLT activities or that it was the magic of the CLT approach that helped them to improve their English and to immerse them into Western culture.

However, my confidence of CLT has been shaken recently after my studying of various works in social/cultural/political context of curriculum, which offered me a new perspective of my previous experience. I realized that language education is never neutral as “it always leaves a residue we cannot control and such is the paradox of language: it is used both to imprison and colonize a people and to set them free” (Manning, 2003, p.133). Looking back into the experience with Chun, I realized that my over-enthusiasm with CLT had limited my horizons. I remembered one class when every student was supposed to participate in a Christmas role-playing activity, Chun kept silent throughout the time. After class, she asked me why there was no description of the Spring Festival in our textbooks and why our school only celebrated Christmas. At that time, I told her briefly that the learning of Western culture would help us to broaden our views, and celebrations of foreign festivals were customs in foreign language schools. Having reviewed this experience, I found my ignorance of the cultural and identity conflicts occurring in my class. I also began to wonder if I might have colonized Chun by rebuilding her just like the other students and infusing her with Western culture. I even began to consider whether I had imprisoned myself in the language I taught, without enough concern for the value of my native culture. Therefore, I agree with Kumaravadivelu (2001) that there should be a shift in perspective by identifying limitations associated with CLT and explorations for adapted version or new alternatives of it with a focus on particularity, practicality and possibility within a post-modern paradigm.

RATIONALE

As a Chinese EFL teacher who has worked in a language school where CLT is required to be used in class, I have experienced the effectiveness of CLT in making students use the target language in real-life like situations, but I also have experienced problems with its implementation within the Chinese cultural context. My experience with Chun is a good example of this. Besides, I have noticed that the textbooks we use for CLT are mostly Western context-based. For this reason, quite a few students have cultural conflicts or confusion and our

native culture and values are marginalized. Nevertheless, I have found that most of my colleagues are still enthusiastic about CLT despite its impact on our native language and culture. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the limitations of CLT and encourage the explorations on adapted versions or new alternatives of it.

As I examined the relevant literature in order to find any possibilities that address the tension between Chinese traditions and culture and Western values and customs, I came upon Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), an approach that recognizes the importance of students' cultural references. A number of researchers (such as Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) contend that CRT can help to address the cultural diversity of children and alleviate the problems caused by cultural conflict. Interestingly, although CRT is not a new idea, most literature I found is limited to abstract theoretical frameworks and the vast majority of studies are focused on literacy education in multi-cultural societies. Few studies have been done in the EFL education field in particular. For EFL teachers working in non English-speaking countries such as China, there should be more information to guide their practice.

Therefore, in this paper, I proposed a mixed approach of CLT and CRT which I term the Culturally Responsive Approach (CRCLT) for Chinese EFL teachers, first by examining its theoretical framework, then by discussing its general principles, followed by recommendations on its implications.

THE PROPOSED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before introducing the new framework, I will first provide its theoretical background by reviewing the CLT and CRT as the proposed CRCLT is based on these two approaches.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Concept

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the widely accepted approach to EFL teaching to date. Its development began in the 1970s, when language educators found the then prevailing grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches failed to foster real communication; hence they began to search for more communicative-style teaching. "CLT has a rich and somewhat eclectic theoretical base of language theory" (Richard & Rodgers, 1986, p.71), among which the most important are the functional view that sees language as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning and the interactional view that "sees language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transaction between individuals..." (Richard & Rodgers, 1986, p.17). The implications for language study is "to look at the use (function)

of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)” (Berns, 1984, p.5). Accordingly, CLT regards communicative competence as the major goal of language learning and focuses on actively developing competence in understanding and communicative meaning (Stern, 1984). Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence as the ability to make use of language appropriately in actual communication. According to them, it minimally involves four areas of knowledge and skills: (a) grammatical competence: the ability of correct use of phonology, syntax, vocabulary and semantics; (b) socio-linguistic competence: the competence concerned with the appropriateness of communication depending on the context including the participants and the rules for interaction; (c) discourse competence: cohesion and coherence of utterances in a discourse; and (d) strategic competence: the set of strategies that are put into use when communication fails.

CLT uses a functional syllabus instead of a grammatical one and formal sequencing of grammatical concepts is kept to a minimum. Most instructions are made in the target language and auditory input for the student becomes paramount. Errors in speech are not corrected too often.

Brown (1994a, b) asserts that situational factors such as topic, role of participant and setting will affect the variation of languages uttered by the speakers and that, in the communicative teaching approach, speakers can vary their choice of vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, intonation and even non-verbal features to tailor their message in different situations. Just as Brown’s analysis demonstrates, CLT makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life (Galloway, 1993). The classroom context is used to create activities to teach students how to react in a real world situation, not pseudo situations.

Recently, CLT has been adapted to the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary levels, and “the underlying philosophy has given rise to different teaching methods known under a variety of names, including notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction, and communicative language teaching”(Galloway, 1993, Section 2, 2). Even in China, where traditional teaching methods have dominated for a long time, there has been a wave of enthusiasm for this approach (Rao, 2002). Most EFL teachers working in foreign language schools are required to use it. However, the wide adoption of CLT has also raised a number of issues such as its validity and viability in specific cultural context for Asian learners (Jarvis & Astilarat, 2004). In the

following section, the limitations of CLT will be examined from a wider social and cultural perspective.

Critique of CLT

While CLT has been adopted and popularized in EFL education in Asia (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004), a group of researchers have identified problems of implementing the approach within specific contexts and have raised issues such as “cultural appropriateness for Asian learners” (Anderson, 1993; Ellis, 1996; Rao, 2002; Sano et. al., 1984) and “linguistic imperialism” (Qiang & Wolff, 2005, p.56). As a result, researchers such as Hymes (1980) challenge the suitability of CLT for Asian contexts and question the notion of “communicative competence”. Nunn (2005) argues that an important notion of communicative competence is “appropriateness”, and he cites Hymes’s (1980, p.49) illustration that such “appropriateness” is a “universal speech”, related to the social codes of speech communities. He claims:

Learning to communicate appropriately has sometimes been taken to imply learning to fit into a particular way of communicating in a target community and students’ own norms would then be seen as inappropriate, interfering with successful communication in a target culture. (Nunn, 2005, p.2)

Nunn (2005) disagrees with such “appropriateness” by claiming that “it is inappropriate to teach language that is only appropriate in limited situations in a target culture that may never be visited by the students” (p.2). In a similar vein, Byram and Fleming (1998) argue that the notion of communicative competence only involves an understanding of the norms of social interaction of one socio-cultural community and it should be expanded to help learners understand differences in interactional norms between different speech communities and learn to reconcile or mediate between different modes present. They put forward the notion of “intercultural communicative competence” which I will illustrate in a later section.

Besides communicative competence, “the principles and pedagogies within the CLT paradigm have also been discussed critically and extensively” (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004, p.2). Bax (2003) argues that CLT is now having a negative effect due to misplaced priorities on the role of the teacher, which draws attention away from the context of teaching and learning. In China, for example, most teachers regard having students participate in classroom activities using the target language as the prime priority, and ignore the students’ individual learning needs and their cultural backgrounds. As a result, most Chinese EFL students have experienced cultural conflict and confusion and some of them have become polarized. Those on one end regard learning English as the gatekeeper to a better

future and they believe English and Western culture are superior to the Chinese language and tradition. Those on the other end feel reluctant to learn English and the Western culture as they regard EFL learning as a betrayal of the Chinese tradition. My student, Chun, belonged to this latter group. Her case illustrates that English teaching may occur in a wide variety of contexts in non-English speaking countries. Chun's example also raises the question of which culture EFL teachers should be addressing when teaching cultural awareness. Thus, an adequate understanding of the limitations of CLT is critical for language teachers and curriculum designers and there is a need for them to explore adjustments and new alternative to fit into the particular cultural context and meet the students' needs.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Theoretical rationale: The socio-semiotic view of language

According to Thibault (1990), social semiotics examines semiotic practices, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in various situational contexts. Halliday (1979) points out that the socio-semiotic view of language emphasizes that language both represents and shapes. "The social structure is not just an ornamental background to linguistic interaction...It is an essential element in the evolution of semantic systems and semantic processes" (Halliday, 1979, p.114). Manning (2003) expands this view further and emphasizes the socio-cultural and political dimensions of language by explaining the paradox of language which is that it can be used both to imprison people and set them free. Based on such a socio-cultural and political perspective of language, Baker (2003) contends that "every language will reflect values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture it came from" (p.2). Thus, "language and culture are intertwined. It is difficult to teach one fully without the other" (Scarcella & Crookall, 1990, pp.229-230).

Concept and principles

As culture has become an increasingly important component of teaching in recent times (Baker, 2003), Culturally Responsive Teaching has been widely recognized as a useful approach to building the link between cultural and classroom instruction. The notion of such an approach is based on the premise that culture is central to learning and plays a role in shaping the thinking processes of groups and individuals (Hollins, 1996). According to Ladson-Billings (1994), it is an approach that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references and empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using such cultural referents to impart knowledge,

skills and attitudes. It recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments (Nieto, 2000).

CRT places high demands on the instructors. Gay (2000) explains that the approach requires instructors to use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective. He notes that culturally responsive teachers should teach the whole child and realize not only the importance of academic achievement, but also the maintaining of cultural identity and heritage (Gay, 2000). During the teaching process, the teacher should not only explain the mainstream culture but also recognize and value the students' own culture.

According to Gay (2000), the principles of CRT are as follows:

1. CRT acknowledged the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
2. CRT builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities.
3. CRT uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
4. CRT incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

Interestingly, from the research reports that I have reviewed, I noticed that while more and more educators agree on the value of CRT in education, most of the existing arguments for its effectiveness are found in literacy education for bilingual children in English speaking countries. There is a lack of research in EFL education in a wide variety of contexts in non-English speaking countries. Most of the existing arguments for its principles appear to give a set of discrete items and abstract instructions, which may lead to confusion and frustration of its practitioners in EFL education field. Thus, it is necessary to redefine and adapt such a powerful approach in EFL education for classroom teachers. In the next section, I propose an approach that combines CRT and CLT, which I have termed as Culturally Responsive Communicative Teaching Approach (CRCLT). The proposed approach attempts to solve the limitation of both CRT and CLT and meet EFL teachers and learners' specific cultural needs.

The Mixed Approach: Culturally Responsive Communicative Language Teaching (CRCLT)

CRCLT is based on CLT and CRT and therefore entails the essence of both approaches. It can be seen as either an adapted version of CRT or CLT. Based on the two approaches, the central tenet and major principles of this mixed approach are illustrated in this section.

Theoretical framework: The expanded communicative competence

Similar to CLT, CRCLT regards communicative competence as its central tenet. However, this communicative competence is an expanded one and along with the four-part framework which includes grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), it includes intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Fleming 1998). The major goal of EFL teaching is not only appropriate communication within one culture of one socio-cultural community, but also communication with cultural awareness between different speech communities within different culture contexts. CRCLT focuses on the use (function) of language in context, including not only its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, situational context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak) (Berns, 1984), but also the intercultural context (what are the differences in interactional norms between various socio-cultural communities). CRCLT regards cultural awareness as equally important as the ability to communicate appropriately in the target language. With such expanded communicative competence as its central tenet, CRCLT can be defined as a communicative language teaching approach that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspect of language learning process. It is an approach that makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication and understanding of the norms of social interaction of different socio-cultural communities. It entails communication in the target language, communication in the culture of the studied language, and communication between the given culture and the students' native culture. It is through such communication that the students' cultural conflicts and confusions are alleviated and their cross cultural understanding developed.

Principles

Since CRCLT is a mixed approach, the principles listed below in this paper are built on the characteristics of both CLT (offered by Nunan, 1991) and CRT (offered by Gay, 2000).

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction between different socio-cultural communities in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts and the incorporation of multicultural

- information, resources and materials into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language and culture, but also on the learning process itself.
 4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences, cultural knowledge and performance styles as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
 5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities in different cultural contexts outside the classroom.
 6. The employment of a wide variety of instructional strategies that help to improve the students' language proficiency and maintain their cultural identity and heritage.

Implications of CRCLT in Non-English Speaking Countries

The proposed mixed approach (CRCLT) aims to offer EFL instructors an alternative to deal with the problem of “cultural inappropriateness and imperialism” in EFL education. However, like CLT and CRT, it is a broad approach to teaching rather than a set of clearly defined classroom practices. For EFL teachers working in a wide variety of contexts in non-English speaking countries, more specific instruction and recommendations are needed. Moreover, for those EFL teachers whose native language is not English, it is even more difficult for them to understand and implement CRCLT as they might feel confused about which culture should be addressed when teaching cultural awareness. Therefore, in the next section, based on my own experiences of EFL teaching in China and in light of the relevant literature, I offer recommendations for classroom teachers, teacher educators, and educational administrators as I have been working as an EFL teacher in China. I believe this research will also benefit EFL teachers working in similar situations in other countries and promote further discussion and encourage new explorations in the field.

Recommendations for Classroom Teachers

First, EFL teachers should remain open to other EFL teaching approaches besides CLT and reconsider the major goals of EFL education. They should identify and analyze the “cultural problems” in their classes as well as recognize the importance of maintaining their students' cultural identities and heritages. They need to regard the development of intercultural competence as important as the other components of communicative competence. As Ladson-Billings (1992) asserted, teachers should attach importance to the development of intellectual, social, emotional and political learning of their students instead of pure language skills. They should bear in mind that they “teach the whole child” (Gay, 2000, p.

2) with their individual cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles.

Second, EFL teachers should reconsider the importance of their native culture in order to make full use of the cultural backgrounds of their students and themselves as resources for teaching and learning English. They should develop cross cultural awareness themselves and instruct the students to respect their cultural and language heritage and also appreciate and understand the culture and value of other socio-cultural communities. It is important for teachers to study not only cultural knowledge of the target language, but also to know where the students and the teachers themselves are coming from in order to bridge the linguistic and cultural divide of the two languages. In my view, CRCLT places more demands on EFL teachers than any previous approaches and in order to use it more effectively, teachers should reflect on their self-development in different skills with a focus on cross-cultural awareness.

Third, EFL teachers should pay attention to their students' individual needs and use a wide variety of instructional strategies that both help to improve the students' language proficiency and maintain their cultural identity and heritage. They should remember that "ESL should be based ... on differences, in an effort to dwell in the uniqueness of the individual while giving him/her the tools to live in the larger community" (Martel, 1991, as cited by Pinar et al., 1995, p.437). A good strategy that I recommend is the cultural comparison strategy, which allows students to compare differences between their native culture and Western culture while still practising the target language. For instance, the teacher can introduce in English some necessary vocabulary and phrases about the traditional native festivals besides the Western festivals in the textbook and ask the students to compare the differences of these festivals through a variety of communicative activities such as role-play, presentation and debate. By doing this, the students might develop understanding of the new culture, and improve their knowledge of their own culture. Most importantly, their cultural references might have been addressed and they will feel more comfortable with learning the new language and culture. Besides this cultural comparison strategy, the additional instruction from teachers of other disciplines (music, science and social studies) may also be a powerful resource to help students develop cross-cultural awareness. For instance, if the given text is an English poem about the Moon, the teacher can invite the native language arts teacher to give a short presentation about similar poems about the moon in the native language. By doing this, the students not only learn the new knowledge of Western poem, but also review the tradition of the poetry of their own culture and learn to respect their cultural heritage.

Recommendations for Teacher Educators

Based on my experience and reading of literature, I have the following suggestions for teacher educators in non-English speaking nations, especially in Asian countries such as China.

First, the textbooks for teacher education need to be updated. Qiang and Wolff (2004) reported that in China, most of the second language education theories were out of date and had been simplified in the textbooks for teachers. Teacher educators should introduce up-to-date language and language teaching theories to teacher candidates, which offer them opportunities to choose the most suitable approaches for their classes.

Second, teacher candidates need to be given opportunities to link theory to practice. The best way to do this is to arrange more time for the teaching practicum and offer teachers opportunities to employ CRCLT during the practicum. I strongly advocate that importance should be given to the evaluation of each pre-service teacher's performance, something that is usually taken less into account in China than in Canada and other countries. In addition, it is also necessary to offer pre-service teachers opportunities to attend conferences and to observe experienced teachers so that they can locate themselves in real classroom settings and become more prepared for their future career.

Third, training courses and workshops for in-service teachers should be arranged. A forum for teachers using CRCLT should be established and teachers' needs for theoretical and practical support should be addressed. The universities might offer annual courses for teachers to take and experts in the field could be invited to provide professional development on this particular teaching approach.

Recommendations for Educational Administrators

My study has proposed CRCLT as a promising EFL teaching approach for EFL teachers working within specific cultural contexts. However, given the fact that in some non-English speaking countries, especially in China and other Asian countries, the implementation of CLT is still at its beginning stage and CRT is only used in a limited number of special language schools, the implementation of CRCLT will occur over time. Chinese EFL teachers who work in common public schools need more support and resources to begin their CRCLT journeys. In my view, educational authorities should make the following attempts to help those teachers and thus promote CRCLT widely throughout the country.

First, efforts should be devoted to the improvement and revision of commonly used test-oriented textbooks to change their focus to real communication between different socio-cultural communities in English instead

of instruction on knowledge and culture about the target language. A variety of extended classroom activities which aim to develop intercultural competence might be included in the textbooks; and detailed instructions of how to implement them should be included in the teachers' books. Besides, teachers should be encouraged to use a diversity of multicultural information, resources and materials.

Second, the teacher recruitment and the preparation system need to be greatly improved. Teachers should be equipped with an understanding of general teaching approaches and be trained to compare their strengths and limitations so that they can reconcile each approach to deal with students' different cultural backgrounds and learning needs. They should also be given opportunities to try CRCLT in real classrooms in their teaching practicum.

Third, the communication between teachers and researchers both home and abroad should be encouraged. International conferences and training courses need to be promoted by the authorities to offer teachers more resources.

The mixed approach CRCLT aims to help EFL teachers to maintain their students' identity and cultural heritage in the process of learning. At this time, research on the CRCLT approach presents only a broad and abstract notion and the effectiveness of its implementation really depends on the instructors. To conclude, I cite Omaggio-Hadley's (2001) suggestion that language educators should take a flexible approach to teaching and designing activities responsive to learner needs and preferences. Classroom teachers should spare no effort to explore and develop the most suitable way to attain the goal of CRCLT in their individual classes.

CONCLUSION

This paper was inspired by my personal experience as a Chinese EFL teacher with a student whose cultural conflict and confusion could not be dealt with by the current dominant CLT approach. In this paper, I gave a personal reflection of such an experience and addressed the concern for the importance of cultural appropriateness of EFL education in Asia and other non-English speaking countries. Based on the examination of the two popular approaches CLT and CRT, I proposed a mixed approach, CRCLT to deal with the limitations of CLT and CRT when they are applied in specific cultural contexts. I also offered recommendations for classroom teachers, teacher educators, and educational administrators based on my teaching experience and reading of literature. Hopefully, this paper will contribute to EFL teachers' knowledge of a promising approach which can be adapted to specific cultural contexts and encourage more explorations for new alternatives in teaching EFL in non-English speaking

countries.

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Yi Lin is a professor at Southeast University in Nanjing, Jiangsu, China where she teaches students in the English major program. She can be reached at 461353819@qq.com or grapesister@hotmail.com.