

Foreign Language Education in China: When Reforms Meet Tradition

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Abstract: Previous research has identified a discrepancy between intended pedagogical reforms and the reality of implementing them in the classroom, particularly for teaching English as a second language in China. The distinction between the conceptual foundation behind Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and dominant local educational principles has been used to explain the difficulty of implementing reform. To gain a deeper understanding of the conceptual constraints on reform, this article describes the Deweyan educational principles behind CLT and the Confucian educational values that underpin the dominant language teaching approach in China. This article also provides a historical perspective of how the two streams of educational ideas have co-existed and interacted in Chinese education in general and in foreign language teaching in particular. This conceptual analysis and historical review provides a deeper understanding of the current status of English language teaching in China and the conceptual constraints on reform.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching, Confucianism, John Dewey

My Story and My Inquiry

I was born and raised in China. I learned English as a foreign language at school in an approach that largely relied on pattern drills, translation, and rote memorization. After studying English in China for approximately ten years, I went to Spain where I enrolled in Spanish language courses. It was during this experience that I had a real taste of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As I gained more experience in foreign language programs that utilized CLT, I thought that foreign language teaching had evolved from what I had experienced at school towards teaching guided by the principles of CLT. However, upon my return to China and through my continued observation and work with foreign language teachers at Chinese schools, I realized that the kind of classroom practices that I experienced more than a decade ago still dominated many of today's foreign language classes. As I delved into the historical study of different educational ideas and their contacts in China, I found that history had much to say to what we are experiencing now with pedagogical reforms and setbacks in the context of foreign language teaching in China.

Context: CLT Reforms in China

Foreign language teaching in China has been portrayed in the literature as predominantly teacher-centred, textbook-directed, and memorization-based (Zheng & Adamson, 2003). Since the 1980s, CLT, which is different from the above dominant approach, has been introduced into China through language educators' discourse in the academic literature (e.g., Allen & Spada, 1983). In 1993, CLT was officially advocated in *Syllabus of Teaching English for Compulsory Education in Junior School of the Nine-year System* and was continuously being advocated in the subsequent editions. Instead of being viewed as a single approach, CLT now has generally been used as an umbrella term to include approaches such as task-based language teaching (TBLT) and project-based language instruction (PBI) (Celce-Murcia, 2014). This change was also reflected in the more recent edition of the English curriculum. For example, in *English Curriculum Standards for Senior Secondary School* (2017), an important goal of English teaching was set as enabling students to be able to do things in English and thus advocated the adoption of communicative tasks and language projects for achieving the goal.

Task-based language teaching, as an offshoot of CLT, particularly emphasizes the critical role that tasks play in the process of learning a language for communication (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Therefore, the syllabus and teaching procedures are designed and implemented based on a series of communicative tasks. Samuda and Bygate (2008) defined a "task" as a "holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both" (p. 69). Project-based language instruction, another branch of CLT, emphasizes the use of a project to facilitate language learning. Beckett (2002) defined PBI as a "long-term activity that involves a variety of individual or cooperative tasks" (p. 54) which includes stages of planning, research, and reporting.

In contrast to the advocacy of the above-mentioned pedagogical reforms since the 1980s, when examining what actually occurs in the classroom, numerous studies have documented that limited evidence of the new pedagogy could actually be identified in teachers' teaching practices (Hu, 2002; Li, 2004; Liao, 2003; Zheng &

Borg, 2014). This indicates a critical discrepancy between the intended reforms and the reality of their presentation in the classroom. For example, Liao (2003) observed that three out of four teachers failed to teach communicatively. In another study, Li (2004) reported that all eight teachers who participated in interviews reported that Grammar-Translation and the Audio-lingual Method or traditional P-P-P model (Presentation, Practice, and Production) dominated their classroom teaching, which diverges from the principles of CLT.

While there are numerous reasons that could account for this discrepancy, a likely cause could be a conceptual constraint (Butler, 2017; Hu, 2002). According to Butler (2017), a conceptual constraint indicates that due to the major distinction between the conceptual foundations behind the new pedagogy and the dominant local educational principles, especially for language teaching and learning, the CLT reforms failed to be taken-up widely by the local stakeholders. Hu (2002) also argued that the existing incongruities between some essential aspects of CLT and the traditional Chinese educational values was the most important constraint on a full adoption of CTL in China. However, in previous studies, this conceptual constraint was accounted for in a very brief and general manner. For example, Butler (2017) noted that

It is a common argument that traditional Confucian notions of teaching and learning in Asia (e.g., the teacher as owner and provider of knowledge, and the learner as recipient of knowledge; valuing literacy over the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills) conflict with the practical, student-centered aspects of CLT. (p. 330)

Admittedly, one needs to be aware of the danger of oversimplifying the complexity of educational values and practices in China. However, as noted by Hu (2002), culturally and historically rooted values are often well-taken and underpin Chinese teaching and learning. Also, comparing and contrasting the different educational traditions does not reject the fact that there are certainly aspects of CLT that are more compatible with traditional Chinese education.

By using the briefly stated conceptual constraint as an entry point, this article advances the literature by delineating the Deweyan educational principles behind CLT and the Confucian educational values that underpin the dominant language teaching method in China. This article also reviews how the two streams of educational ideas have co-existed and interacted in the Chinese educational context from a historical perspective, both in general, and in foreign language teaching in particular. This paper argues that the influence of Deweyan theories— those based on the ideas of John Dewey and his followers— upon the educational landscape of China was a prerequisite condition for the acceptance of a communicative approach to foreign language teaching. For educators, either within Canada or abroad who work with the large number of English-language learners and teachers from China, this conceptual analysis and historical review will provide a deeper understanding of the so-called conceptual constraint in the complexity of CLT reform and thus also an understanding of the current status of English language teaching in China.

Deweyan Theories and CLT Reforms

Three aspects of Deweyan ideas underpin CLT reforms. The idea of language as social instrument, learning by experience, and child-centered theory will be discussed in this section.

Dewey was not only a philosopher and educator, but also a language teacher. In his time, Grammar-Translation was the predominant approach for teaching foreign languages, in which teachers and students engaged in intellectual exercises involving complicated grammar rules (Herron, 1981). Dewey (1897) referred to such an understanding of language and language teaching as language as a logical instrument. He wrote against this approach by stating, “it is true that language is a logical instrument, but it is fundamentally and primarily a social instrument” (Dewey, 1897, p. 83). By calling language a social instrument, Dewey emphasized that language arises from practical necessity, as he wrote about the origin of language as “a natural function of human association” (Dewey, 1925, p.73). For Dewey, language is ultimately a device for communication. Decades later, in the 1970s, the movement of communicative competence in the field of linguistics and applied linguistics emphasizing the communicative nature of language echoed Dewey’s understanding of language as a social instrument (Heron, 1981). Similarly, Dewey’s understanding of language also underpins the CLT, as a language teaching approach developed along with this communicative movement, since CLT views communication as both the means and the end of language teaching and learning (Celce-Murcia, 2014).

The idea of learning by experience was at the center of Deweyan educational theories. Dewey (1916, 1938) believed that learning comes from learners' interactions with the environment. In 1938, he distinguished between traditional education in which students learn from texts and teachers, and progressive education, in which learning occurs through experience. Dewey (1916) proposed the problem-solving method that treated the school and classroom as microcosms of the community where learners work together to solve shared problems. Although it is a rather new approach in second-language education, PBI originated more than a century ago with Dewey and his follower Kilpatrick's (1918) project approach in advancing education. The idea of learning by experience was the fundamental principle behind the approach of TBLT and PBI for realizing the goal of teaching language communicatively.

The teacher-student relationship is another aspect of the CLT approach that was informed by Deweyan ideas, particularly child-centered theory. Dewey was against the teacher-centered approach, which focused solely on the curriculum being transmitted to the learner. Instead, he argued that learning is the outcome of the learner's personal experiences, and the teacher is responsible for guiding, directing, and evaluating these experiences (Dewey, 1938). Similarly, in CLT, students are at the core of instruction, and the teacher's role is to organize tasks and projects, facilitate, and consult (Celce-Murcia, 2014).

Confucianism and Tradition

As previously discussed, much of the CLT pedagogical reforms in foreign language teaching are rooted in Deweyan educational theories. However, the Chinese educational system has been strongly influenced by the Chinese educator and philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE), and his followers (Starr, 2001). Therefore, before examining the trajectory of the Deweyan influence on China's educational system, one must review the Confucian educational values in which Chinese education has long been rooted. This is necessary in order to understand how the Chinese educational values derived from Confucianism differ significantly from Deweyan ideas.

To have an accurate understanding about Confucianism's educational ideas, a distinction should first be drawn between Confucius's personal ideas and Confucianism: "Confucianism as an official promoted orthodoxy for centuries may or may not reflect the thinking of Confucius" (Yen, 1987, p. 50). Before the Han Dynasty, Confucius's ideas were mainly confined to his personal beliefs and practices; however, with the founding of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), the ideas that were associated with Confucius received state support and became the state's ideology (Guo, 2004). For example, while rote learning was often associated with Confucianism education, Guo (2004) noted that there was no evidence that Confucius advocated for recitation methods; instead, his followers emphasized rote learning and memorization of the canon of Confucianism throughout history. Therefore, in this article, when Confucianism or Confucian educational ideas are discussed, it refers to the reinterpreted and reinforced orthodoxy only.

The influence of orthodox Confucianism on Chinese education in history has been manifested in various aspects, such as in teaching materials, pedagogy, student-teacher relationships, and assessments. *Four Books* and *Five Classics* compose the canon of Confucianism, which are regarded as the embodiment of the highest moral, ethical and aesthetic values and are equivalent to the law of the universe (Yen, 1987). Therefore, these texts were studied extensively throughout ancient China, especially after the Han Dynasty. *Boshi*, the term for academic doctors in Mandarin Chinese, was originally used to address senior scholars in charge of teaching *Five Classics* in the Han Dynasty. With Confucianism as the ruling ideology, a fundamental objective of education was to enable students to read and understand the Confucian doctrines (Lee, 1985). Therefore, literacy education, or character learning, was the key to the entire system of Chinese education. Unlike phonograms, where there exists a correspondence between a grapheme (written symbol) and a phoneme (sound), Chinese characters are logograms with no direct relationship between graphemes and phonemes. Therefore, books such as *Three Character Classic*, *Hundred Family Names*, and *Thousand Character Essay* were commonly used to teach pupils to read and write through memory-laden and passive practices (Lu, 1995). Lu (1995) described the process as follows:

Children would most likely copy characters from the Three Character Classic, which contained three-character lines of verse consisting of 1068 characters in all. They also learned by heart the Thousand Character Essay, which consisted of 1000 characters in lines of four characters each with no character repeated throughout the entire book. (p. 58)

These early textbooks taught the Confucian moral code, history, general knowledge, and Chinese characters when possible (Lu, 1995). For example, *Sanzijing [The Three Word Primer]* begins with “Man on earth, Good at birth. The same nature, varies on nurture,” (Zhao, 2014, p. 1) which is a direct translation from the *Analects*: “By nature, people are close to one another; through practice, they drift apart” (Huang, 1997, p. 163). To understand these ideas, pupils were required to repeat and recite the text over and over again, which was depicted in a Chinese proverb that the meaning of a book will become clear if you read it hundreds of times. This approach of studying morality, together with literacy education, was delivered through a detailed study of a selection of textbooks, and contrasts with Deweyan ideas of regarding lived experience as the major source of learning. However, this way of learning language and literacy has had a long influence on language education in China even until today.

According to Confucian doctrine as stated in the *Analects* (Huang, 1997), children should obey parents, wives should obey husbands, disciples should obey masters, and ordinary people should obey the ruling classes. These familial and social hierarchies were also transferred to classrooms: the relationship between a student and their teacher is analogous to the relationship between a child and their father (Cleverley, 1985). Similar to a father’s authority in a family, a teacher’s position in a classroom should not be questioned. Following such a tradition, it is not hard to understand the difficulty of reverting the teacher-centered relationship to learner-centered, as Deweyan theories suggest.

The Imperial Examination, a civil service examination to select candidates for the state bureaucracy, started as early as the Sui Dynasty (581-619 BCE) and gradually became a major path to government office in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 BCE) (Starr, 2012). The Imperial Examination, which was conducted for more than 1,300 years, had a significant impact on Chinese intellectual, cultural, political, and educational beliefs and practices: scholars were required to study classic books and to recite and explain them in a way that conformed to the orthodox interpretation (Yen, 1987). Starr (2012) noted that even after the Imperial Examination was abandoned in 1905, this exam-oriented teaching and learning is still dominant today in contemporary China.

Reforms and Tradition: Early Contacts

Before the latter half of the 19th century, Confucianism and Confucian education were predominant throughout Chinese history. However, after the Opium War (1839-1842), China experienced constant threats from foreign countries (Sun, 1999). This period is when Confucianism started to be questioned by Chinese intellectuals, who severely criticized Confucian classics and the imperial examination for China’s delayed development in science and technology (Sun, 1999). In 1905, the Imperial Examination was abandoned. Seven years later, the Qing Dynasty, China’s last royal dynasty, collapsed. As noted by Sun (1999), in this period of crisis, there was an attempt to “save China” through “introducing new learning, new values, new thoughts, new modes of life, new literature, new education and new spirits” (p. 72).

Dewey arrived in China in May 1919 (Sun, 1999). During his two-year-and-two-month stay in China, he addressed seventy-eight lecture forums, including delivering several series of between 15 to 20 lectures; these were recorded in numerous journals and articles, and at least five book editions containing these lectures were published, as noted by Sun (1999). Dewey’s former Chinese students at Columbia University further magnified his influence on China, as these students included some highly influential names in the modern history of Chinese education (Lau, 2012). As Lau (2012) commented, “the new China was mainly led by people like Hu Shih, Chen Heqin (Chen Houchin), and Tao Xingzhi, who were students of Dewey and had been exposed to Western education. These followers were responsible for many changes that took place in Chinese education” (p. 3).

This period of reform introduced a new type of education, which was especially influenced by the American educational system and American ideas. Zeng (2005) traced this educational reform and its close relationship with Deweyan theories in his study. In 1922, a new curriculum covering primary, secondary and tertiary education, was put into practice. As noted by Zeng (2005), some Deweyan ideas, such as education as life, the importance of children’s experience, and the relatedness between education and the needs of life, were clearly reflected in the seven guidelines of the curriculum. To relate classroom work to the demands of real life, more practical and vocational instruction was introduced in schools; the study of Chinese classics was reduced, whereas there was an increase in the study of social and industrial subjects (Zeng, 2005).

Foreign languages (either English or another language) became one of the three core subjects in the secondary

school curriculum after the 1922 reform (Ross, 1992). The close-to-real-life nature of education was also brought to foreign language teaching at this time. When summarizing English teaching in China between 1919 and 1949, Yang (2000) described it as

The objectives set in the curriculum revealed, to some extent, the objectives of the new educational system, e.g., building up students' interests and learning English through daily practice. Teaching methods and instructional materials in the coastal areas, especially in mission schools, helped to bring authentic language use to students. (p. 7)

English teaching varied considerably from the coastal to interior areas and from government to mission schools as recorded by Dzau (1990) and Yang (2000). In coastal areas and especially at mission schools, native teachers were common and authentic materials were adopted, and English in these locations was taught directly in English through communicative activities (Dzau, 1990). Dzau (1990) commented that with much exposure and communicative activities, students learned to express themselves in English fairly well. In government schools, in contrast, the predominant pedagogy was Grammar-Translation (Dzau, 1990; Yang, 2000), an approach that was similar to the study of Classic Chinese, with a detailed study of model texts, rote memorization, and translation.

From 1949 to 1979, the educational context revealed “Dewey at the Nadir” (Sun, 1999, p. 82), contrasting the fervent interest in studying Deweyan ideas before and the revival of interest after this period. During this time, Dewey and his Chinese students were criticized, mainly because of the prevailing extreme Leftism and politicized academic activities (Sun, 1999). Rejecting American influences, China copied its educational system, curriculum, materials, and pedagogy from the Soviet Union and Russian became the major foreign language that was taught in school (Yang, 2000). The overall cultural, intellectual, and educational context was strictly under control, especially as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) commenced, and “there was no room left for individuality, creativity and critical thinking” (Yang, 2000, p. 13). Porter (1990) noted that under the strict political control, teachers memorized and taught students orthodox ideas, and no one risked criticism. Porter claimed that this situation resembled the custom of memorizing the approved Confucianism classics in ancient China.

Foreign language teaching in China in the 1950s was mainly through so-called Intensive Reading, which is an adaptation of the Grammar-Translation Method: “A lot of time was spent on explaining in detail the meaning and usage of words, analyzing the grammatical structures, and drilling the structures through translation” (Yang, 2000, p. 12). There was a rather short period of time in the 1960s when many Chinese schools adopted the Audio-lingual Method that originated from the United States’ army programs (Dzau, 1990). When the Cultural Revolution started, the Audio-lingual Method was abandoned because of its close association with the United States, and consequently the teaching of grammar then returned to the Grammar-Translation Method (Adamson & Morris, 1997). Lehmann (1975) observed that in a typical lesson, the teacher provided a word, phrase, or sentence in English and requested choral repetition while students were then required to read aloud and to translate texts into Chinese. Lehmann (1975) commented that the only oral communication in English was the questioning and answering that was based on the text, with very little spontaneous use of English. In general, China’s education, including foreign language teaching, remained under the influence of the Soviet Union and rigid intellectual control between the 1950s and the 1980s (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Dzau, 1990; Yang, 2000). This type of education resonates with the Confucian way of teaching and learning.

The Cultural Revolution, a 10-year seclusion, was terminated in 1976; two years later, China initiated an economic reform that opened the country to the rest of the world. These changes also signaled a revival of Dewey’s educational ideas along with other Western theories in China during the 1980s (Lao, 2012; Sun, 1999; Zeng, 2005). Sun (1999) claimed that the reason for this revival of interest in Dewey is that “China is becoming more and more pragmatic today” (p. 85). Along with these changes, foreign language teaching after 1978 received much more interest than before. Foreign languages were considered to embody the “scientific, progressive, and creative thinking” (Ross, 1992, p. 250) that China’s leaders advocated for the modernization of the country. As China has become increasingly more involved in international activities, the predominant way of foreign language teaching, which emphasizes reading, writing, grammar-analysis, recitation, and pattern drilling, has gradually revealed its inefficiency (Yang, 2003). Problems with this way of foreign language teaching became prominent as more and more Chinese people needed to conduct real conversations with English speakers. In many cases, these learners were found to be lacking in oral communication, despite having adequate ability in reading and writing (Yang, 2003). Therefore, the objectives of teaching foreign languages changed from reading to oral communication skills.

With the shift on communication especially on oral skills, CLT has gradually gained popularity in China's English teaching circles (Yang, 2000).

Reforms and Tradition: The Current Status

The intended pedagogical reform of the instruction of communicative approaches has occurred not only with foreign language teaching. As noted by Guo (2004), the Chinese government has been making effort to improve the quality of education by shifting teaching away from memorization and lectures to more learner-centered and constructivist approaches. However, as suggested by the identified discrepancy between the intentions of pedagogical reform and the reality of their adoption in the classroom, what Yang (2000) meant by the popularity of CLT in China's English teaching circles included only policy makers and theorists, but not classroom teachers.

Although progressive educational theories have been introduced in China, the long and deeply rooted Confucian educational tradition still remains as the dominant set of educational values in foreign language classrooms. This observation echoes Guo's (2004) argument that traditional Confucian traits still dominate current teaching and learning in China. Starr (2012) has even claimed that the old educational values returned stronger than ever after the 1970s. He attributed this return to Chinese parents' high expectations of their children's education as compensation for the educational opportunities that they were deprived of during the Cultural Revolution. This expectation is further strengthened by the *One Family, One Child Policy* since the only child in the home tends to be expected to achieve educational success by the whole family. Furthermore, Starr (2012) also associated parents' high expectations of children's education with the economic reforms that happened in China. With a command economy, schools and university graduates in China were allocated jobs. However, as China moved to a market economy, obtaining a job required fierce competition, which generated considerable pressure on students and their families to achieve educational success in the form of entering well-reputed schools and universities. For the above reasons, the Confucian influence is still clearly present in contemporary foreign language education in China, although reform was initiated as early as the mid-1980s (Starr, 2012). Teachers and students were required to use a series of textbooks chosen by the Ministry of Education. According to Kang (2014), "all levels of examinations are textbook-orientated," and the People's Education Press (PEP) held the major "academic authority" (p. 9). *Junior English for China*, published by the PEP, was adopted in middle schools nationwide for an entire decade in the 1990s. As Kang (2014) recorded, it was not until 2001 when 38 experimental districts for curriculum reform were allowed to select their own textbooks for the first time in China's history. This "coverage model" (Chaffee, 1992, p. 122), where the textbook defines the content of the teaching, is hardly reconcilable with CLT. In CLT, authentic materials that are closely related to learners' life and experiences are supposed to be adapted from mass media, the community, and academic or professional sources.

A century after the abandonment of the Imperial Examination, the exam-centered tradition is still clearly present in the current Chinese education system. Students must compete in the College Entrance Examination to enter a hierarchical university system. Li (2004) reported that the College Entrance Examination was a factor that hinders the practice of CLT in secondary schools. In tertiary education, students again face large-scale standardized tests including the College English Test (CET) which consists of Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6). However, the focus of CLT on language communication skills contrasts sharply with the exams' focus on reading and written skills and linguistic accuracy. According to Van Lier (2006), when high-stakes standardized tests dominate education, project-based learning and similar initiatives tend to be pushed into the periphery of the educational landscape. Similarly, it is not hard to understand the challenges of CLT reform when the high-stake exams still dominate the educational system.

Regarding the teacher-student relationship, CLT also requires a fundamental shift from traditional education. However, Chinese teachers and students do not easily accept the role of the teacher as a facilitator. In Li's (2004) study, a teacher noted that,

I tried to apply CLT. While students were working together as a group to practice English, I just walked around and monitored the group activity. One student asked me straightaway: 'We are busy doing the task, but you seem to have nothing to do and look very relaxed. Have you prepared your lesson?' (p. 59)

The traditional teacher-student relationship has been passed from generation to generation similar to one teacher in Li's (2004) study who noted that when "teachers taught with a textbook; students listened. This was the

way of teaching in China for thousands of years. I was taught this way, and then I taught my students this way too” (p. 59). Thus, Confucianism is found to be still largely dominant in Chinese society and educational settings. Although new pedagogy for foreign language teaching has penetrated the academic literature and curriculum documents, this has not been the case for the large population of local teachers, students, and parents.

Conclusion

In this article, the discrepancy between the intended pedagogy and the reality of classroom instruction for teaching English as a foreign language in China was examined from a historical perspective. On the one hand, the ideas behind the intended pedagogy require a fundamental shift from the Confucian educational tradition. CLT was born out of progressive educational ideas that center on students who learn from their peers and that are guided by real life. The Confucian educational tradition focuses on teachers, textbooks, and exams. Some major challenges need be met to teach foreign languages with a communicative approach. On the other hand, the influence of progressive education, with John Dewey as a representative figure, has only reached to a limited extent within China. The Confucian tradition still dominates the present Chinese educational system.

In fact, the dilemma between the educational reforms and the strong and persistent Confucianism tradition that Chinese education is facing is not limited to foreign language teaching, but has become a more profound question with the internationalization of educational curriculum. The setbacks that the pedagogical reforms have encountered have suggested the impracticality of simply transplanting western educational ideas to China, considering its deeply rooted local educational philosophy. Under such a condition how do we value the wisdom from different traditions? How do we find a way to form a “cultural ecology” (Pinar, 2014, p. 14)? How do we inform the contemporary curriculum with different traditions? These are the questions that confront contemporary Chinese education.

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