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The Implementation of Communicative and Task-Based Language Teaching in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have been widely adopted in the Asia-Pacific region, with a number of Asian countries strongly promoting CLT and TBLT in their curricula and English language education policies. Despite their popularity, a number of challenges have arisen in connection with implementing CLT and TBLT in Asian classrooms. The challenges that have emerged include (a) conceptual constraints (e.g., conflicts with local values and misconceptions regarding CLT/TBLT); (b) classroom-level constraints (e.g., various student and teacher-related factors, classroom management practices, and resource availability); and (c) societal-institutional level constraints (e.g., curricula and examination systems). These constraints have led some to argue that successfully implementing CLT and TBLT in Asia requires adaptation to local environments, such that CLT and TBLT become embedded in local practices. Although there have been a growing number of reports of various CLT/TBLT implementation efforts in different Asia-Pacific regions, we still have only a limited understanding of how best to achieve contextually embedded adaptations and how they affect students' English learning. After reviewing relevant studies, this article suggests potential options for moving forward, including (a) employing more contextually feasible and flexible interpretations of CLT and TBLT, (b) implementing decentralized or innovative language-in-education policies, and (c) creating communities of learning outside of the classroom as well as in the classroom.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have influenced English language teaching worldwide, and Asia is no exception to this trend. In many parts of Asia, there has been mounting criticism of the traditional approaches to English language teaching, such as the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. These traditional ways of teaching can be characterized as synthetic approaches, and a common critique of such approaches is that they fail to help students develop a high level of communicative

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ability. In the synthetic approach, the target language is broken down into constituent parts in various ways, and such parts are then presented to learners in a linear fashion (e.g., grammar rules, words, phonemes, structures, functions; see Wilkins, 1976). Long and Robinson (1998) argued that such approaches, labeled *focus on forms*, lead to instruction that isolates linguistic forms from their meaning.

To provide an alternative to synthetic approaches, various governments in Asia established CLT and TBLT as major components of their English language curricula and instruction programs. Despite their popularity, however, there are a number of reports that point to challenges that have arisen in connection with implementing CLT and TBLT in Asian classrooms. This review attempts to expand our understanding of the implementation of CLT and TBLT in the Asia-Pacific region and to present a number of instructional and policy-related suggestions.

Although there are extensive publications on CLT and TBLT in local Asian languages as well as unpublished documents including master's theses and doctorial dissertations, the review here only includes published articles in English and excludes opinion papers that do not offer any empirical, theoretical, or policy analyses to support their claims.

I begin with a description of the educational and policy backgrounds that underlie the adoption of CLT and TBLT in the Asia-Pacific region. Since CLT was introduced in the region before TBLT, I review the initial concerns cited regarding implementing CLT in classrooms in the region. Next, I review more recent implementation efforts in various parts of the Asia-Pacific region, with a particular focus on TBLT, and identify potential options for moving forward with such implementations. The article concludes with a number of suggestions for policy, research, and instruction. As shown later in the article, the majority of the published studies on this topic have came from scholars in China (including Hong Kong), Japan, and South Korea, and a smaller number of studies have come from authors in Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). Therefore, the discussion is inevitably somewhat limited (and possibly skewed) to countries generating more frequent reports in Asia. For the rest of this article, "Asia" is used to refer to the broader Asia-Pacific region (i.e., East and Southeast Asia).

THE INTRODUCTION OF CLT AND TBLT IN ASIA

The premise of CLT is to develop learners' communicative competence in social interactions, as opposed to focusing primarily on linguistic forms (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2005). Meaningful communication is considered to be both the means as well as the goal in CLT. Learners in the classroom should therefore be given opportunities to receive meaningful input and to use language meaningfully through interactive works (Brown, 2001). CLT is broadly based on theories of communicative competence and second language learning. However, this theoretical broadness has invited various interpretations of CLT and led to some variety in its realization in practice. The strong version of CLT is based

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on the assumption that language acquisition is a natural process where learners self-analyze the language; this version holds that this process cannot be directly controlled by the teacher. The teacher's role is thus to facilitate this process, rather than to teach the learner pre-analyzed linguistic knowledge. Weaker versions of CLT, while keeping the same ultimate objective, see a more direct role of the teacher in this process and suggest that the teacher should introduce structured, meaningful communicative activities in a controlled manner in the classroom so that learners can gradually and autonomously express meaning in more naturalistic settings (Klapper, 2003). X. J. Li (1984) suggested that there are three conditions that activities must satisfy in order to be classified as communicative: (a) they must be embedded in real situations; (b) they have purpose and convey substance in communication; and (c) they contain a certain level of freedom and unpredictability.

The term *task* was increasingly used as a replacement for *communicative activity* during the 1980s (Skehan, 2003), and in this respect, TBLT can be considered as "an offset of CLT" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 66). It is important to note, however, that the definition of a task itself has been a matter of some debate. Tasks can be considered, for example, to be "things people will tell you they do" (Long, 1985, p. 89) in which the connection with the real world's activity is emphasized. Another definition that has been offered focuses on the cognitive process, defining a task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process" (Prabhu, 1987, p. 24). Researchers such as Ellis (2003) and Samuda and Bygate (2008) have tried to synthesize the essential characteristics of tasks, defining them as follows: "[a] task is 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" (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 69). In addition, some authors view the precise features of tasks as varying depending on the pedagogical and research purposes, as well as depending on users and contexts (teachers, learners, and assessments) (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001).

Similarly, researchers have also debated how tasks should be used in instruction. A number of different versions of TBLT have been proposed, ranging from a strong version (*task-based teaching*; see Willis, 1996) to a weaker version (*task-supported teaching*; see Ellis, 2003). Whereas the former sees tasks as the central component of syllabus design, the latter uses tasks for communicative practice in conjunction with a grammar- or function-based syllabus. As with CLT, however, such varied approaches in TBLT have invited substantial confusion at the practice level in Asia, as we shall see later.

CLT was introduced in Asia in the 1970s, but it took some time to gain widespread attention in the region. For example, in China, there was a strong resistance among teachers to employing CLT in classrooms, and a heated debate arose over its applicability and effectiveness (Hu, 2002a, 2005; Yu, 2001). In Japan and Korea, the importance of communicative ability in language education had been recognized among innovative English language teaching professionals and in the private sector, but it was not until the late 1980s and the early 1990s that

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CLT became the center of attention among general English language educators and policy makers (Butler & Iino, 2005; Y.-H. Choi, 2007).

With the rapid expansion of international exchanges via business, technology, and communication, the governments of various Asian countries became increasingly concerned about insufficient communication skills in English among their population. CLT quickly gained further recognition and became a central component of their national curricula and syllabi. In China, the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) introduced a CLT-based syllabus in 1992. The SEDC's 2001 syllabus required implementing TBLT at the secondary school level, and a number of textbooks for TBLT have been published since then (Liao, 2004). CLT was at the forefront of South Korea's *7th National Curriculum* announced in 1997 (Y.-H. Choi, 2007). The National Curriculum in Japan, *The Course of Study*, introduced "communication abilities" as the central premise of foreign language education in 1999 (Butler & Iino, 2005, p. 34). Singapore's 1991 *English Language Syllabus* reflected the rapid advance of CLT and gave teachers greater flexibility in fostering students' communicative skills as facilitators rather than as knowledge providers. The syllabus also promoted theme- and topic-based instruction (L. J. Zhang, 2006). Hong Kong adopted TBLT officially in its syllabus in 1997 at the primary school level and in 1999 at the secondary school level (Carless, 2007). Other Asian countries surveyed in Nunan (2003), including Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam, all adopted CLT and/or TBLT in their curricula.

INITIAL CONCERNS REGARDING CLT

As already mentioned, CLT became a slogan for English language teaching in many Asian countries. However, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, a growing number of studies have reported various concerns and difficulties in implementing CLT in Asian language teaching contexts (for China: Anderson, 1993; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Hu, 2002a, 2002b; Penner, 1995; Rao, 1996, 2002; Sun & Cheng, 2002; for China and India: Holliday, 1997b; for Hong Kong: L. Miller & Aldred, 2000; for Japan: Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2008; Sakui, 2004; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004; Sano, Takahashi, & Yoneyama, 1984; for the Philippines: Gonzalez, 1985; for Singapore: Kirkpatrick, 1984; for South Korea: S. Choi, 2000; D. Li, 1998; for Thailand: Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008; for Vietnam: Pham, 2007; Sullivan, 2000). The majority of these studies were survey, interview, or classroom observation studies (or a combination). According to these studies, three types of constraints limit effective CLT implementation in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in Asia: (a) conceptual constraints, (b) classroom-level constraints, and (c) societal-institutional level constraints.

Conceptual Constraints

Conceptual constraints stem from the differences between the principal concepts of CLT and those of the traditional view of learning and teaching in Asia. From the earliest stages of the implementation of CLT in Asia, observers of Asian classrooms questioned the universality of the features considered as

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communicative in nature (e.g., oral-focused activities, the importance of group work, and teachers as facilitators of communication.). Considering these features to be the hallmarks of communicativeness can be ethnocentric; what accounts for so-called good communication is often based on particular cultural values. Many have argued that being sensitive to local cultural norms and beliefs is necessary if CLT is to be successfully implemented (Anderson, 1993; Holliday, 1997a, 1997b; Sullivan, 2000). Cameron (2002) went a step further; she expressed concern over the "obsession with 'communicative skills' and 'communication problems'" (p. 67) in contemporary language teaching and warned of the dangers of imposing Anglocentric ideologies on genres and styles of communication. Bax (2003) expressed concerned over CLT's hidden assumption that CLT is the only modern and progressive solution for language learning irrespective of context, and proposed a context approach that allowed various ways for learning a language based on context.

In Asia, a common discourse is about the conflict between the Western premises of CLT instruction and the Confucian norms that conceptualize learning as the acquisition of knowledge residing mainly in books (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2002a, 2002b; T. Miller, 1995; Rao, 1996). Traditionally, a literary education was considered important, and little value was placed on the acquisition of knowledge for practical purposes. The teacher was seen as the possessor and messenger of profound knowledge, and the student as the recipient of that authoritative knowledge. Under such a view, literacy-focused and teacher-centered teaching was a natural consequence. According to these authors, such a mismatch in cultural values regarding teaching and learning makes it difficult for teachers in Asia to implement CLT in their classrooms.

However, this cultural value-based explanation itself has come under criticism for presenting an oversimplified view of culture and ignoring diversity within cultures (McKay, 2002). Indeed, it has been documented that there are substantial differences in school practices and cultures across Asia as well as within each country. The stereotypical view of Asian students as more passive, less vocal, and preferring lecture-style instruction does not always accurately describe students in Asia. For example, Kubota (1999) observed considerable differences in classroom cultures between elementary schools and secondary schools in Japan. In Savignon and Wang (2003), Taiwanese college students, and those who had had early English education in particular, showed a preference toward meaning-based communicative activities in class. Taiwanese high school students in Chung and Huang (2009) showed positive attitudes toward CLT. Similarly, the stereotypical view of Asian teaching as being authoritarian and teacher-centered does not always seem to reflect reality. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) found that elementary school teachers in Japan and Taiwan spent little time lecturing compared with U.S. teachers. Vietnamese teachers in Ha (2004) used a variety of communicative-based instructional techniques in order to give their students autonomy in their English classes and objected to the stereotypical views commonly imposed on Asian teachers. It is thus potentially misleading to overemphasize the role of traditional cultural values (such as Confucian values) in shaping Asian classroom practices at all grade levels across Asia.

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Another conceptual difficulty with implementing CLT stems from teachers' and students' "misconceptions" about CLT and how CLT might be adopted (D. Li, 1998, p. 687). One can argue that this is partially because CLT itself is open to interpretation, as we have seen already. Moreover, since CLT was employed as an alternative to the grammar-translation method in many countries in Asia, it was often interpreted as synonymous with the natural approach or what Long and Robinson (1998) would call "instruction with a 'focus on meaning'" (p. 18). In this interpretation, L2 learning should take place with sufficient input through natural exposure to the target language, and the learner should subconsciously and inductively analyze such input. Without receiving sufficient training, it was not uncommon to find Asian English teachers who believed that CLT focused only on oral language, ignoring grammar instruction and the accuracy of language use (D. Li, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). In response to the prevailing so-called misconceptions of CLT, Savignon (2005) devoted a section to clarifying "what CLT is not" (p. 645). According to Savignon, CLT is not exclusively meant for oral interaction, does not necessarily require small group work, and it does not exclude the role of conscious knowledge of the structure of language (e.g., grammar instruction). Unfortunately, many countries in Asia started implementing CLT in their curricula before providing their teachers with sufficient training (Kam & Wong, 2004). This appears to be particularly evident in English education at the primary school level, where policy decisions have frequently been hastily made without providing teachers with sufficient training (e.g., Butler, 2004).

Classroom-level Constraints

The second set of constraints relate to various contextual constraints at the classroom level. Such constraints include the lack of human resources and material, structural challenges (e.g., large class sizes, limited number of instructional hours), and issues with classroom management. Nonnative English-speaking teachers in EFL contexts often do not feel confident that they possess sufficient sociocultural and strategic competencies to introduce communicative activities in their classes or to assess students' communicative competence (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Butler, 2004; D. Li, 1998; Nishino, 2008; Pham, 2007; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008; Rao, 1996; Sakui, 2004; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004; Sun & Cheng, 2002). Teachers may not understand how to actually implement CLT in their classrooms. A number of observational studies have reported that what were called communicative activities introduced in class were not in fact communicative and were often found to be mixed with an audio-lingual approach and/or an explicit form-focused approach (Lee, 2002; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008; Yukawa, 2002).

Although various types of materials have increasingly been introduced in Asia, Asian teachers have often found it difficult to choose meaningful materials that are appropriate for their students (e.g., Butler, 2005a). Reliable and effective authentic assessments are still largely limited in number. Furthermore, teachers often do not have enough resources, assistance, or time to develop materials and assessments by themselves. It is also important to keep in mind that the concept of authenticity is ambiguously understood in many Asian EFL contexts.

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What is perceived to be authentic often means materials and activities that accurately reflect the actual use of language and activities in English-speaking countries. One can find numerous types of materials and activity books that have been imported from the inner circle (Kachru, 1992) to Asia. However, such materials may or may not relate to Asian students' daily lives or correspond to the kinds of language that they would use in real communicative contexts as a means of global communication.

In addition, large class sizes and limited instructional hours have been frequently mentioned as major obstacles for implementing CLT in Asia (e.g., D. Li, 1998; Nishino, 2008; Sakui, 2004). In large classes, teachers sometimes find it a challenge to introduce interactive activities and to ensure that everybody participates. Performance-based assessments tend to be time-consuming in such large classrooms. Group work may invite excessive discussions unrelated to the objectives of a given activity, often in the students' first language. Such activity-irrelevant discussions may make it difficult to keep the class in order in such a way that is culturally perceived as desirable (e.g., Butler, 2005a).

Societal-Institutional Level Constraints

The third set of constraints identified in prior studies consists of structural constraints at the societal-institutional level. The most significant constraints in this category include grammar-translation-oriented college exams and the limited opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. The grammar-translation-oriented college exam system is considered to be a major structural constraint prevalent in Asia in general (e.g., Kam & Wong, 2004). According to previous studies, with an already limited number of hours allocated to English in the curriculum, teachers and students have tended to think that CLT might not be the most efficient way to teach or acquire grammar and reading/writing proficiency, particularly with the added pressure of college exams. It is interesting to note, however, that a number of Asian countries have recently attempted to include communicative components in their college entrance exams (e.g., incorporating listening tasks and writing tasks). While teachers may be fully aware of such attempts, studies have often failed to find the intended washback effects in teaching methodologies in classrooms (e.g., for Hong Kong: L. Cheng, 2004; for Japan: Gorsuch, 2000; for China: Qi, 2007).

Last, it has been claimed that there are still relatively few opportunities for the majority of Asian students to use English communicatively outside of their classrooms (e.g., Rao, 2002). This factor has been of particular concern among educators who teach English in areas in the expanding circle (Kachru, 1992). However, it is also worth noting that there is much variability with respect to learners' opportunities to use English outside of the classroom even within these regions.

In sum, while CLT has substantially influenced the curricula and syllabus designs in English language teaching in Asia, there exists a substantial discrepancy between policies and actual practices at the classroom level. Although the importance of acquiring what is perceived to be communicative competence is generally acknowledged, researchers have reported a number of constraints

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that work against implementing CLT in Asia, and they have questioned whether or not the currently specified features of CLT are universally effective across cultures and across contexts. As Mitchell and Lee (2003) have demonstrated in their comparative study of Korea and the United States, it is often very challenging (and sometimes may not be appropriate) to directly transfer what has been identified as an effective pedagogy in one context to another. It has been repeatedly claimed that the acquisition of communicative competence needs to be achieved in contextually appropriate ways. The empirical question thus remains as to how best to do so in Asian contexts.

FROM ADOPTION TO ADAPTATION: INCREASING INTEREST IN TBLT

Given the various challenges it faces in its implementation, CLT has gradually lost its popularity to TBLT among TESOL professionals, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006). The exact relationship between CLT and TBLT is still debatable. Kumaravadivelu's position is that TBLT is not associated with a particular method but rather should be considered as a "curricular content" (p. 65); that is, Kumaravadivelu argued that TBLT should be considered as encompassing tasks that form part of a different method that leads to different learning goals. Others argue that TBLT is "the latest methodological realization of CLT" (Nunan, 2003, p. 606). In whatever way we might characterize the relationship between CLT and TBLT, as Kumaravadivelu has observed, there have been a growing number of publications in Asia since the mid-2000s that specifically focus on TBLT. Two special volumes dedicated to TBLT in Asia were published in the late 2000s: One was in *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly* in 2006, and the other was in *Asia Journal of English Language Teaching* in 2009. As we have seen before, tasks can range from more structured-based to more communicative-based tasks (Skehan, 2003). Such flexibility with regard to the definition of TBLT seems to be appealing to TESOL professionals in Asia.

Studies investigating the early stages of TBLT implementation in Asia revealed similar challenges to those seen in the implementation of CLT as already discussed here. For example, Carless (2002, 2004) examined the implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong elementary schools through a series of interviews with teachers and classroom observations and identified three major problems: (a) difficulties in maintaining discipline, (b) students' excessive use of their mother tongue, and (c) substantial variability among students with respect to their production of the target language. Carless (2003) also identified six preclass planning issues: (a) a lack of belief among teachers in the benefits of the tasks they were overseeing; (b) teachers' understanding of the tasks at hand, (c) time constraints, (d) the relevancy of topics covered in textbooks versus the tasks being designed, (e) resource availability in the preparation of tasks, and (f) students' proficiency levels. Tong, Adamson, and Che's (2000) classroom observation at an elementary school in Hong Kong revealed that most activities were not fully communicative. Instead they could be characterized as somewhere between what Ellis (2003) called an *exercise* and a *task*, in both English classes and Chinese classes. Jeon's (2006) survey found that one of the biggest obstacles

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for secondary school teachers in South Korea was their lack of confidence in conceptualizing TBLT and implementing it in their own classrooms.

Based on his extensive experience working with teachers in East Asia, Littlewood (2004, 2007) proposed a five-level model in order to respond to the need among teachers for a finer-grained framework for communicativeness in activities. His model describes the degrees of communicativeness along a continuum that ranges from activities that focus on forms to those that focus on meaning. Littlewood's (2004) continuum included noncommunicative learning, precommunicative language practice, communicative language practice, structured communication, and authentic communication. Littlewood (2007) suggested that teachers who are used to form-oriented activities in class "can maintain their base in activities represented in the first and second categories, but gradually expand their repertoire into the other three" (p. 247).

The Adaptation of TBLT: Flexibility in Context

Recently, there have been a growing number of case studies that have tried to identify how best to adapt TBLT in various contexts, as opposed to solely addressing the difficulties with its implementation. At the national level, Singapore provides us with an example of such efforts. L. J. Zhang (2006) found that Singapore's national syllabus of English language in 1991 was influenced by the CLT movement and therefore viewed language as a meaning-making system, had a strong emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy, marginalized grammar teaching, and promoted a holistic approach to language teaching. However, "to pacify the outcry from the general English-speaking public," the revised syllabus in 2001 placed "grammar in the text type" (p. 4) as a central component and integrated reading/writing and oral communication, while heavily emphasizing literacy development among children. The 2001 syllabus also considered Singapore's sociocultural factors seriously and set the acquisition of a standard variety of English (as opposed to a certain native-model of English) as its target.

Case studies from classrooms in various countries and at various grade levels all address the important role that context plays in implementing TBLT. Many of these studies dismiss the strong version of TBLT (Willis, 1996) and suggest flexibility in its implementation within a given context. In other words, the discussions centered around how a weaker version of TBLT, or what Ellis called *task-supported language teaching* (2003), can be implemented in classrooms.

At the elementary and secondary school levels, where TBLT is often introduced as part of an officially mandated curriculum, studies frequently have found that TBLT is not implemented in classrooms as the policy intended and have suggested that major adaptations are necessary if TBLT is to be implemented effectively. In Hong Kong, several case studies have revealed a number of key components for the potential adaptation of TBLT based on teachers' experiences and insights (e.g., Carless, 2007, 2008, 2009; Luk, 2009; Tinker Sachs, 2007, 2009). For example, Carless (2007), through his interview with secondary school teachers, identified three major areas for adaptation: (a) granting a greater role to grammar instruction in TBLT, (b) incorporating TBLT with due attention paid to the students' examination requirements, and (c) employing a greater

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emphasis on reading and writing tasks. Carless (2007) also suggested a flexible approach toward the use of students' first language (L1) during tasks, including the possibility of using L1 for language-analysis tasks. Given the fact that there is a strong and prevailing preference toward the traditional presentation-practice-production (P-P-P) approach over TBLT among teachers, Carless (2009) further suggested that it may be possible to productively combine P-P-P with TBLT in such a way that the teachers can minimize the limitations that P-P-P may have, instead of completely dismissing it.

Similarly, Deng and Carless (2009) conducted a series of interviews and classroom observations at an elementary school in Guangdong, China, and found that most activities were low in communicativeness (i.e., less focused on meaning); they were classified as either noncommunicative learning or precommunicative language practice using Littlewood's framework (2004, 2007). Similar to what we saw in Hong Kong, the TBLT mandated by the state in Guangdong was also not implemented in classrooms. Moreover, teachers showed a preference toward activities with lower communicativeness. While the interview data of Deng and Carless reveal that the implementation of TBLT was largely constrained by the teachers' limited understanding of tasks and examination factors in China, the authors also suggested that Littlewood's framework should not be considered as a barometer of the desirability of activities. That is, we should not consider activities with higher communicativeness as always being "desirable" (p. 131). According to Deng and Carless, depending on various contextual factors—such as the students' proficiency levels and age—activities with different degrees of communicativeness should be chosen and combined.

Case studies at the college level also cite similar findings when it comes to adaptation, though college teachers are usually granted more autonomy in adapting curricula when compared to their elementary and secondary school counterparts. As a result, various examples of actual adaptations have been cited in the literature (Lingley, 2006; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Muller, 2006; Nunn, 2006; Rivers, 2008; Watson Todd, 2006). For instance, Watson Todd (2006) examined the implementation of a task-based curriculum at a Thai university and analyzed how and why changes were made by the instructors during the first 4 years of its implementation. Based on interviews with the instructors, three major changes were revealed: (a) reducing the number of tasks introduced in class, (b) placing greater emphasis on explicit grammar instruction, and (c) granting greater roles to summative examinations in the courses examined. With these changes, the revised curriculum looked more like "a mixed methodology" rather than "a pure version" of TBLT (Watson Todd, 2006, p. 9).

Lingley (2006) described a case where a task-based approach was implemented in a content-based course (a Canadian Studies course) in a Japanese university. Content-based instruction (CBI) aims to develop students' content knowledge and second language skills and is increasingly popular across Asia (Butler, 2005b). In Lingley's study, when teachers were observed developing material, the notion of authentic material was redefined in order to respond to the needs of students who did not have sufficient language skills or content knowledge. The original texts were simplified while attempting to keep the language natural. Form-focused activities such as vocabulary instruction

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were considered as "a necessary foundation step in working through the staged progression of tasks that become more meaning focused" (p. 131). Teachers had to play various roles during the tasks. When the students were not capable of completing the tasks, it was found that the teachers inevitably became heavily involved in the students' tasks in order to assist them to engage in meaningful activities. In sum, previous case studies have all stated in one form or another that flexibility and attention to the context in which instruction takes place is the key component for the successful implementation of TBLT in Asia.

UNSOLVED ISSUES AND CONCERNS

There is indeed "emerging evidence of successful, grass-roots implementation of task-based teaching in Asia" (Adams & Newton, 2009, p. 1), but a number of unsolved issues and concerns remain. Some of the most prominent issues and concerns include (a) how best to implement tasks in an exam culture (Hamp-Lyons, 2007), (b) when and how best to include grammar instruction in TBLT, (c) students' use of their L1 in TBLT, and (d) the difficulty of top-down policy implementations.

The first and perhaps most serious concern with respect to the implementation of TBLT in Asia is how to implement communicative tasks and task-based assessments in an exam culture where norm-referenced classic testing has exerted so much influence on teaching and learning practices (e.g., Carless, 2007; D. Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007). In such environments, syllabi and teaching methods are strongly influenced (or sometimes determined) by the contents of assessments, and teachers often "feel powerless" over instructional and assessment-related decisions (Hamp-Lyons, 2007, p. 498). In order to implement tasks and task-based assessments, not only are changes in the exam system required, but also drastic conceptual changes toward learning and assessment in general in society are necessary. This is unlikely to happen easily because the exam culture is so deeply rooted in sociocultural history in Asia. For example, referring to the situation in China, Y. Cheng (2010) stated that certain merits of the exam system (such as being considered a fair selection device) and some of its harms are both recognized and accepted by Chinese society.

If the government sets the goal of language learning as acquiring communicative competence, and tasks are used to achieve this goal, one could easily say that assessment goals should reflect this and that task-based assessments should be used. However, it is much more complicated than it may at first seem. Long and Crookes (1992) indicated that in TBLT assessment should be conducted "by way of task-based criterion-referenced tests" (p. 45). However, a number of issues still remain to be solved, including how the criteria are determined (e.g., linguistic performance vs. task-completion), how and by whom tasks are developed and/or selected to correspond to such criteria, and how and by whom can student performance be rated validly and reliably. Adding to the complexity of the last point, traditional psychometric notions of validity

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and reliability may not be applicable depending on how task-based assessment is employed. Inevitably, teachers need to play a critical role in many of these processes. And without empowering teachers, it would not be a surprise to see TBLT winding up being a mere policy slogan.

Hong Kong has been innovative in that it has implemented a school-based assessment (SBA) as part of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in English since 2005. SBA is a task-based in-class performance assessment and accounts for 15% of the students' final English scores on the HKCEE. In SBA, the students are assessed against criteria, and the teachers can adjust the assessment tasks according to individual students' levels and needs. Various concerns were initially raised regarding the implementation of SBA (e.g., fairness issues, concerns regarding teachers' increased workloads, and teachers' qualifications as assessors; Davison, 2007). However, teachers were given substantial support and thereafter appeared to gain more confidence and control; the result has been that "SBA is beginning to take hold in the English language curriculum" (Davison & Hamp-Lyons, 2010, p. 261). Although this is certainly a very promising move, some difficulties remain. For example, Luk (2010) closely examined students' group interactions in SBA and found that the students were making a "collective attempt to present a best impression of themselves as well as the whole group through ritualized, institutionalized, and colluded talk" (p. 46). The students usually prepared a speech in their group discussion in SBA in advance, even though this behavior was discouraged, and some students might have even rehearsed these ahead of the assessment. According to a participating teacher, in order for everybody to display their abilities fully, the students did not challenge others while they were talking and took turns mechanically, and as a result, the interaction became unauthentic. Luk's case study elegantly illustrates the complexity of task-based assessment when contradictory roles are imposed on it (namely, the dual purposes of being both a showcase for learner performance and being a venue for authentic communication).

A second concern, which is partially related to the assessment issues already discussed, is when and how best to incorporate form-focused instruction in TBLT. Although most TBLT methodologists see the importance of form-focused instruction in TBLT (Skehan, 2003), they do not have a clear consensus about when and how best to incorporate this in task-based lessons. It has been generally suggested that focus on form is necessary during the posttask phase, but not the pretask or during-task phases, because the latter two options could make a given task an exercise of preidentified vocabulary and structures (Ellis, 2003). However, teachers who are comfortable with the traditional P-P-P approach have often indicated that this suggestion is counterintuitive or inappropriate. As we have seen already, recommendations for implementing TBLT in Asia often include some type of form-focused instruction at the pretask phase due to the students' needs or institutional requirements (such as the requirement to use prescribed textbooks). A critical question that remains is the extent to which such adapted implementations of form-focused instruction at the pretask phase are effective in Asian classrooms. Muller's (2006) small-scale case study at a Japanese junior college showed that his students with lower English proficiency could use words beyond the prescribed ones introduced at the pretask phase

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but could not creatively use grammatical forms beyond those introduced in the textbook during the task. One can assume that various student-related and contextual factors may have influenced the effectiveness of such adapted versions of TBLT in complicated ways. Luk's (2009) case study of a secondary school teacher in Hong Kong indicates that teachers' notions of form-focused instruction may be limited to lexical and structural components, and that they may not include discourse or genre awareness. Both of these latter components could potentially help students to use language more meaningfully. Such limited perceptions among teachers can also affect results. In any case, unfortunately, we have very little empirical information to provide teachers with useful guidance on this matter.

A third issue relates to the use of students' L1 in TBLT in foreign language contexts. In a teaching context where students share the same L1, an excessive use of L1 is a frequently articulated concern among teachers. The excessive use of L1 also often relates to teachers' concerns with classroom management. While the potential benefit of L1 in second and foreign language learning has increasingly been acknowledged, it is not easy to for teachers to make judgments about when and how much L1 the students are allowed to use (or encouraged to use on certain occasions) in TBLT. Carless (2007) addressed one significant dilemma between L1 and TBLT, noting that "the more absorbing the task, the greater is the risk of student use of MT [mother tongue]" (p. 335). Eguchi and Eguchi (2006) found that, while their college students in Japan enjoyed a project-based lesson (composed of a series of tasks), this was largely due to their excessive use of L1, and as such they found that the tasks performed had little effect on their English learning. The more meaning-focused the task becomes, the greater the incentives that students need to perceive in order to complete the task at hand with their fellow students in their foreign language. As Eguchi and Eguchi commented, "Speaking English is like using an old computer when a new one is available. Why use English when they can finish the job in their native language in a snap?" (p. 221). This raises a fundamental question with regard to what counts as authentic and meaningful language use in a foreign language context. Again, we still have little information to use to find an answer to this question.

Finally, various studies have repeatedly found difficulty in implementing top-down, mandatory TBLT implementations. Based on extensive interviews with stakeholders, classroom observations, and document analyses in Shenzhen, China, E. Zhang (2007) described how the original intentions of curriculum policies were transmitted, understood or misunderstood, and changed by agents at different levels in its implementation. Individual teachers implemented the curriculum (the enacted curriculum) differently, and accordingly these versions of the curriculum were experienced by their students (the experienced curriculum) differently. Complicated power relationships within schools and institutions also may not allow individual teachers to exercise their knowledge and beliefs (Tsui, 2007). Examining the complicated process of top-down curriculum implementation and understanding the substantial role that teachers play in the process, it is not too surprising that the intended TBLT is not found at the classroom level.

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The four concerns described in the preceding paragraphs are just a few of the major concerns that many teachers face in adapting TBLT in their teaching contexts. There is a lack of studies that have systematically examined the effectiveness of various adaptations of TBLT. The overwhelming majority of studies conducted so far on this topic have employed interviews with teachers and/or classroom observations. In order to understand both the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic effectiveness of various adaptations tried out in Asian contexts, more diverse research approaches are necessary.

POTENTIAL OPTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Based on the information drawn from previous studies, a number of potential alternatives to enable English teaching in Asia to move forward are indicated. Such alternatives include (a) employing more contextually feasible and flexible interpretations of CLT/TBLT, (b) implementing decentralized or innovative language-in-education policies, and (c) creating communities of learning outside of classrooms as well as in classrooms, including using new technologies to enable this.

First, more flexible conceptualizations and methodologies for CLT/TBLT appear to be necessary. As we have seen here, several constraints in the implementation of CLT/TBLT in Asia have been identified. However, we may need to consider them as positive forces, rather than constraints, that help teachers and learners to develop approaches that maximize their teaching and learning. Depending on the context, drills may be suggested or even highly effective in combination with other strategies. Ding (2007), for instance, found that text memorization and imitation were the most effective strategies identified by competent Chinese learners of English. It may be possible to pursue teacher-fronted but communicative activities in crowded classrooms. As Carless (2009) suggested, incorporating certain aspects of P-P-P in TBLT may be more adaptable or appropriate in some contexts.

As already mentioned, CLT and TBLT were introduced as counter-approaches to the traditional synthetic approach in Asia, but they were not easily adapted to Asian classrooms. What we have seen is that teachers have struggled to incorporate such innovative approaches into their specific teaching contexts. It seems that CLT and TBLT have gradually spread throughout Asia, mostly in their weak formats, but that they are often greatly compromised, modified, tailored, and even changed outright in order to work in a given context. Some may say that what we see currently in many Asian classrooms is not CLT or TBLT in their original sense. However, one could also argue that the CLT or TBLT used in Asian classrooms should be considered as an outcome of the natural consequence of searching for localized task-supported teaching, rather than treated as poorly implemented or lost-in-translation versions of the original forms. In my interpretation of the studies reviewed in this article, researchers and theorists can provide teachers with a basic recipe of the tasks that are performed in TBLT. However, depending on the context, teachers may want to change some of the

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ingredients or add some local elements. In negotiating their local environments, teachers should be given great autonomy to decide how best to synthesize and digest the tasks of TBLT in order to maximize the effectiveness of their teaching.

Second, more decentralized and flexible language policies may be advisable. Traditionally, educational policies in Asian countries often have been carried out in a strong top-down manner, and thus, without having a top-down push, any substantial changes in practice are perhaps unlikely in many Asian contexts. However, as we have seen here, implementations of CLT/TBLT that have been mandated from the top down have been difficult to implement in many classrooms, particularly when teachers and students have less autonomy in its adaptation. Therefore, it is important to have a balanced combination of top-down direction and bottom-up flexibility in order to implement CLT/TBLT successfully. A critical component of the top-down direction is to ensure that teachers receive sufficient training and support so that they will understand the purpose of the new policy and have the resources to implement it. Otherwise, a lack of support may end up generating little change in practice, or it could accelerate widening gaps in resource availability (e.g., Hu, 2005, which describes the environment in China), and this in turn may contribute to socioeconomic divisions by English proficiency levels within a given country. It also appears that the top-down direction needs to be accompanied by drastic reforms in the exam system. Although the washback effects of testing are not as straightforward as one might expect (L. Cheng & Watanabe, 2004), there is little room for teachers to develop bottom-up influence or control under the current exam culture that prevails in Asia. Though it will not be easy to change societal attitudes toward exams, it also does not appear to be an impossible task to cause some changes, as we have seen here in the case of SBA in Hong Kong. In sum, a top-down implementation of TBLT has to be accompanied by sufficient teacher training and various other forms of support for teachers and schools, as well as reforms in the exam system, while at the same time allowing a greater degree of bottom-up flexibility in the implementation process.

Third, we need to develop communities of learning outside of the classroom, as well as inside it, in order to implement CLT/TBLT. This may be particularly important for contexts where learners see limited opportunities to use the target language in their real-life situations or where learners share the same L1 and see little relevancy in engaging in tasks with their peers in a foreign language. In major cities in China, one can often find English corners or English clubs where students create spaces to use English among themselves outside of the classroom. According to Gao (2008), such spaces not only provide participants with opportunities to practice English but also serve as a means of bringing together a supportive community that grants learners greater autonomy in their learning.

New technology has tremendous potential to provide learners with new and greater opportunities to use English across geographies. Recently, there has been emerging interest in computer-mediated communication (CMC) in TBLT (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Thomas & Reinders, 2010), and Asia is no exception to

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this trend (e.g., Alwi & Adams, 2009; Greenfield, 2003; Hwang, 2008; Kiernan & Aizawa, 2004; Murray, 2007; Stockwell, 2010). CMC can provide authentic interactional spaces within and across classrooms that may promote a community of learning. In addition, in CMC, students' output can be easily collected and monitored by teachers, and this can be an attractive feature for teachers in crowded classrooms. At this point, however, research concerning how best to introduce CMC as part of TBLT in specific teaching contexts in Asia is very limited. In Greenfield (2003), 11th-grade Hong Kong students and U.S. students collaboratively produced an anthology through CMC. The results indicated that the Hong Kong students found the project enjoyable and helpful when it came to gaining confidence in English and computational skills as well as improving their speaking and writing skills. However, the Hong Kong students felt "ambivalent" (p. 46) about improving skills directly related to the standardized exam (HKCEE) such as grammar and discourse skills. It appears that we need more research on the use of new technology; however, technology is certainly a promising tool for TBLT in Asia.

CONCLUSION

Although CLT and TBLT have gained substantial popularity in language-in-education policies in many countries in Asia, a number of constraints on the implementation of CBI/TBLT in Asia have been reported. The importance of considering the context in which education takes place has also been emphasized repeatedly. More recently, we can see a shift in focus from CBI to TBLT. A growing number of case studies have also indicated that innovative approaches have been experimented with in various parts in Asia, especially in contexts wherein teachers have greater autonomy over the implementation of TBLT. These studies consistently emphasize the importance for having flexibility in implementing TBLT.

Prabhu (1990) stated more than 20 years ago that there seems to be no single golden method that works well for everybody regardless of context. Similarly, for a specific context, there is no single method that works best all the time. Whether or not we are in the state of the "postmethod" era (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 66) perhaps depends on how we define "methods" (Bell, 2003). Similarly, whether or not CLT/TBLT works in Asia depends on how flexibly we can conceptualize CLT/TBLT. However, it is perhaps safe to say that effective practice, whatever that denotes conceptually, is grounded in context and has never been static. Indeed, a historical analysis indicates that various types of methods and approaches have been widely exercised, dismissed, and revitalized across time and regions (Fotos, 2005). This recursive journey in search of effective practice may simply be a result of the complex relationship between teaching/learning and contexts. This journey is likely to continue, with new and different challenges, in order to respond to rapidly changing teaching/learning environments and the diversifying needs of learners.

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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Two special volumes on TBLT in Asia were published in the late 2000s: One was in the *Asian EFL Journal Quarterly* in 2006 and the other was in *Asia Journal of English Language Teaching* in 2009.

Adams, R., & Newton, J. (Eds.). (2009). TBLT in Asia: Constraints and opportunities. *Asia Journal of English Language Teaching, 19*.

Following an introduction by its guest editors, Adams and Newton, this special volume consists of seven empirical studies: one from China (Chunrao Deng & David Carless), two from Japan (Michael Hood, James Elwood, & Joseph Falout; Eriko Ishii), three from Hong Kong (David Carless; Jasmine Luk; Gertrude Tinker Sachs), and one from Malaysia (Nik Aloesnita Nik Hohd Alwi & Rebecca Adams). While these case studies illustrate the challenges that teachers face when implementing TBLT, they also indicate the various possible ways one may adapt task-based instruction in context. Though sometimes provocative, the insights and suggestions addressed in these case studies will stimulate any current discussion of how TBLT can be implemented in contextually appropriate ways.

Littlewood, W. (2007). Communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms. *Language Teaching, 40*, 243–249.

This article is based on Littlewood's plenary speech delivered at the International Conference of the Korean Association for Teachers of English in Seoul in June 2006. In this article, he reintroduced a five-level framework indicating the communicativeness of activities that he had developed over the prior years. The framework explains the degree of communicativeness along a continuum from more form-focused activities to more meaning-based activities. Although this framework, as we almost always see with any newly developed model, is not free from criticism (e.g., Bruton, 2007), it has been widely used in research as well as professional development in Hong Kong and other Asian regions.

Robertson, P., & Jung, J. (Eds.). (2006). Special conference proceedings volume: Task-based learning in the Asian context. *Asian EFL Journal Quarterly, 8.*

This special volume is a collection of papers which were originally presented as part of the Annual Asian EFL Journal Conference held in Pusan, South Korea, in March 2006. The volume includes general theoretical and methodological issues on TBLT contributed by leading TBLT researchers including David Nunan, Rod Ellis, Francis Mangubhai, and Rebecca Oxford. Other papers in this volume include case studies from different regions in Asia (i.e., four papers from Japan by Roger Nunn, Darren Lingley, Theron Muller, and Mariko Eguchi & Keiichi Eguchi; one paper from South Korea by In-Jae Jeon; and one paper from India by Meena Lochana & Gitoshree Deb). Many of these case studies dealt with the issue how best to strike a balance between form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in context. The volume also includes a paper from Ahmet Acar that addresses the importance of the perspective of English as an international language in task design and implementation.

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