Plenary speeches

Communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms

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As educators and governments in East Asia aim to increase the number of people in their population who can communicate effectively in English, national policies and syllabuses have moved increasingly towards various versions of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). This paper reviews, on the basis of published reports, some of the practical and conceptual concerns that have affected the implementation of CLT and TBLT in primary and secondary schools of East Asia. It discusses some ways in which teachers have responded to the challenges by adapting new ideas and developing methodologies suited to their own situations. It proposes a methodological framework which may help such adaptation. The experiences and concerns described in the paper may be shared by teachers anywhere who move from a teacher-centred approach to one in which the learners play a more active, independent role.

1. Introduction

Educators and governments in East Asia are intensively addressing the need to increase the number of people in their population who can communicate effectively in English. In order to achieve this, over the past twenty years or so, national policies and syllabuses have been moving increasingly towards various versions of communicative language teaching (CLT). Ho's (2004) survey of developments in fifteen countries of East Asia shows the extent to which 'CLT has become a dominant model since the 1980s in this part of the world' (p. 26). This is confirmed by the results of Nunan's (2003) survey of the educational policies and practices in seven countries in the region, in which 'all of the countries surveyed subscribe to principles of CLT, and in a number of them, [task-based language teaching] (the latest methodological realization of CLT) is the central pillar of government rhetoric' (p. 606).

As Nunan indicates, in several countries, teachers are already being urged to move on from earlier forms of CLT and introduce task-based language teaching (also referred to as task-based instruction or task-based learning, henceforth referred to here as TBLT). In Hong Kong, for example, the Education Department (now Education and Manpower Bureau) has promoted TBLT since the mid-1990s (see e.g. Curriculum Development Council 1997 – for primary schools; Curriculum Development Council 1999 – for secondary schools). In Mainland China, the national English Language Standards, published in 2001, 'strongly advocates task-based teaching, the latest methodological realization of communicative pedagogy' (Hu 2005a: 15). According to Lee (2005: 186), 'the National English Curriculum in Korea also focuses on the task-based approach'. Even in countries where official syllabuses have not been labeled task-based, the concept of 'learning through tasks' has become an intrinsic part of the professional discourse and local innovations with TBLT are frequently introduced (see e.g. Vilches 2003, in the Philippines; Mukminatien 2004, in Indonesia; Kiernan 2005, in Japan; Watson Todd 2006, in Thailand).

In principle there is not any discontinuity between CLT and TBLT. Richards (2005: 29) includes both task-based and content-based instruction as 'extensions of the CLT movement but which take different routes to achieve the goals of communicative language teaching – to develop learners' communicative competence'. Nunan (2004: 10) sees communicative language teaching as an overarching concept ('a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum') of which 'task-based language teaching represents a realization ... at the levels of syllabus design and methodology'. Littlewood (2004: 324) also regards TBLT as 'a development within the communicative approach', in which the crucial feature is that communicative 'tasks' serve not only as major components of the methodology but also as units around which a course may be organized.

This paper reviews, on the basis of published reports, some of the practical and conceptual concerns

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that have affected the implementation of CLT and TBLT in primary and secondary schools of East Asia. It discusses some ways in which teachers have responded to the challenges involved. The paper then suggests that an underlying source of tensions has been the lack of clarity about what CLT and TBLT really mean, and proposes a methodological framework which may contribute to resolving some of these tensions.

The focus in this paper is on the context of the East Asian region but the experiences and concerns described in it should not be seen as exclusive to East Asian classrooms. They may be shared by teachers anywhere whose innovations diverge from the teacher-dominated, transmission-oriented pattern which has been so resilient in classrooms over the centuries (Watkins 2005: 8–12) and which is characteristic of familiar methods such as grammar-translation, audiolingualism and situational language teaching.

2. Some concerns in implementing CLT and TBLT in East Asian classrooms

According to Ho (2004: 26), the most common understanding of the communicative approach in East Asia is that it means 'providing the teachers with communicative activities in their repertoire of teaching skills and giving learners the opportunity in class to practise the language skills taught'. The practical concerns expressed by teachers are indeed related mainly to the introduction of communicative activities (or 'tasks') in which learners are expected to negotiate meaning without the direct control or intervention of the teacher.

The five concerns which are mentioned below reflect three main areas of criticism. The first – 'classroom management' – directs attention to how, with large classes of often unmotivated young and adolescent learners, the activities associated with CLT and TBLT often present difficulties of practical implementation which do not exist in the smaller classes where the innovations were first developed. The second and third – 'avoidance of English' and 'minimal demands on language competence' – reflect a perception that these activities often fail in any case to stimulate the rich use of the target language that is claimed by the proponents of the approaches. The fourth and fifth – 'incompatibility with public assessment demands' and 'conflict with educational values and traditions' – focus on the external constraints which hinder the widespread use of activities associated with CLT and TBLT in East Asian education systems.

2.1 Classroom management

Perhaps the most frequently voiced concern is that CLT and TBLT create problems of classroom management. The familiar 'PPP' sequence (presentation, practice, production) represents not only a way of 'delivering' the language specified in the syllabus but also a way of controlling the interaction in class. A concern voiced by many teachers is that when students are engaged in independent, task-related work, this control no longer operates. For example, in an early study of the introduction of task-based learning into Hong Kong primary schools (Morris et al. 1996: 58), 'many teachers had difficulty resolving the dilemma over the need for teacher control and the need to facilitate pupil-centred learning'. In a later case-based study of primary school teachers in Hong Kong, Carless (2004: 656) too found that 'concerns over noise and discipline inhibited task-based teaching'. A South Korean teacher quoted by D.F. Li (1998: 691f.) comments that with large classes, 'it is very difficult for classroom management if we use the communicative [method; for] example, when everyone starts to talk, the class can be very noisy', perhaps leading to complaints from other teachers. A Mainland Chinese teacher interviewed by C. Y. Li (2003: 76) expresses her frustration that when she tries to organize communicative group work, 'many students just sit there idling their time . . . I'm very frustrated. Then I have to pull them back to grammar and exercises.'

2.2 Avoidance of English

Even when there are no overt signs of misbehaviour or lack of involvement, many teachers are concerned that the students may not be using English as the medium of communication in their groups. In an observational study in South Korean primary school classrooms, Lee (2005: 201) found that there was sometimes excessive dependence on the mother tongue to solve communication problems, which 'deprives learners of the opportunity to listen and speak in the target language'. This was also a major concern of the teachers in Carless's study, who 'identified pupils' use of Cantonese as the most prominent difficulty that occurred during tasks because this practice conflicted with the teachers' espoused goal of learners using English' (Carless 2004: 642). Some Mainland Chinese teachers in C. Y. Li's study highlighted their students' low English proficiency as the factor preventing them from using English in communication activities. One of them commented: 'I often see the kids struggling to express themselves in English . . . To be safe, I prefer to use the method I am familiar with to help the kids learn' (C. Y. Li 2003: 690).

In many cases, teachers themselves lack confidence to conduct communication activities in English because they feel that their own proficiency is not sufficient to engage in communication or deal with students' unforeseen needs. This factor is mentioned by teachers in, for example, Hong Kong (Morris et al. 1996), Mainland China (C. Y. Li 2003; Rao 1996), South Korea (D. F. Li 1998) and Japan (Samimy & Kobayaski 2004). In his overview of fifteen countries,

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Ho (2004: 26) cites teachers' uncertain command of English as a factor which has hindered the introduction of communicative methods.

2.3 Minimal demands on language competence

Carless (2004: 643f., citing also Seedhouse 1999) points out that, in communication tasks, students may focus on completing the task to the extent that they 'sometimes produce only the modest linguistic output necessary to complete it'. This is what the teachers in Carless's study sometimes found; indeed they sometimes queried whether the amount of language generated by the tasks justified the large amount of time spent on them. Carless himself observed one class in which the students were able to complete an assigned survey task in silence, because they already knew most of the information required. Lee (2005: 199f.), too, noted that many students in the South Korean classes he observed did not attempt to exploit their full language resources but produced language at only the minimum level of explicitness demanded by the task. Also, rather than engaging in the negotiation of meanings predicted by theories of TBLT, students were more inclined to use simple strategies which made fewer language demands (such as guessing). The teachers in Carless's study were concerned that the interaction was sometimes dominated by just one or two students, a phenomenon noted also by Lee.

2.4 Incompatibility with public assessment demands

Systems of public assessment usually fail to keep pace with other developments in the curriculum. This is reflected in the recurrent concern that CLT and TBLT do not prepare students sufficiently well for the more traditional, form-oriented examinations which will determine their educational future. According to Shim & Baik (2004: 246), for example, teachers in South Korea are 'caught between government recommendations on the one hand and the demands of students and parents for a more examination-oriented classroom instruction on the other'. This is confirmed by the teachers in D. F. Li's (1998) survey, all of whom named 'grammar-based examinations' as an important constraint on using CLT. In Japan, the close association of English study with the university entrance examinations, which emphasize grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension, means that students and teachers are less inclined to focus on communicative aspects of English (Gorsuch 2000; Samimy & Kobayashi 2004; Butler & Iino 2005). Chow & Mok-Cheung (2004: 159) mention the 'summative, norm-referenced, and knowledge-based orientation' of the high-stakes examinations in Hong Kong as a major obstacle to the implementation of a task-based curriculum. At a recent seminar attended by the author, several Hong Kong teachers confirmed that students' and parents' concerns about public examinations were among the main factors constraining their adoption of a task-based approach.

2.5 Conflict with educational values and traditions

Independently of the practical concerns mentioned so far, many teachers and researchers have questioned whether the communicative approach is appropriate in countries with 'cultures of learning' (Cortazzi & Jin 1996) different from Western settings where the approach was developed. Hu (2005b: 653) describes the traditional Chinese culture of learning as one in which 'education is conceived more as a process of knowledge accumulation than as a process of using knowledge for immediate purposes, and the preferred model of teaching is a mimetic or epistemic one that emphasizes knowledge transmission'. The classroom roles and learning strategies which this culture engenders conflict with a learner-centred methodology such as CLT but are highly supportive of a teacher-centred methodology. Similar arguments are presented by Rao (1996). Chow & Mok-Cheung (2004: 158) refer to the shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred pedagogy as a 'quantum leap' in the transmission-oriented context of Hong Kong schools. With reference to Japan, Samimy & Kobayashi (2004: 253) describe possible 'cultural mismatches between theoretical underpinnings of CLT and the Japanese culture of learning', and mention in particular the difficulties that might arise from the importance attached by CLT to process rather than content, its emphasis on meaning rather than form, and the different communication styles it entails. In South Korea, 'the fundamental approach to education needs to change before CLT can be successful there' (D. F. Li 1998: 696); however, 'South Korea and other EFL countries with similar situations should adapt rather than adopt CLT into their English teaching' (ibid.).

3. How teachers 'adapt rather than adopt'

In the context of mismatches such as those described, it is inevitable that, in the words of Ho & Wong (2004: xxxiv), 'there has been much criticism of an unquestioning acceptance of CLT techniques in ELT in this region and of the varying practices of CLT'. In some cases, teachers' response has been simply to reject or ignore the policy-makers' proposals. In many parts of Mainland China, for example, according to Hu (2004: 43), 'the intensive top-down promotion of CLT notwithstanding, pedagogical practices in many Chinese classrooms have not changed fundamentally'. In South Korea, the conflicting demands mentioned above have sometimes led to a situation where 'teachers are

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left with no other choice than to write up reports that comply with government recommendations while continuing to practise examination-oriented classroom instruction' (Shim & Baik 2004: 246). Pandian (2004: 280) writes that in Malaysia, 'when the initial euphoria of implementing the concepts laid down by the KBSR [Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (New Primary School Curriculum)] and KBSM [Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (New Secondary School Curriculum)] under the notion of communicative competence had died down, classroom teaching seems to have returned to the chalk-and-talk drill method'.

These essentially defensive strategies are counterbalanced by many reports which echo D. F. Li's (1998) advice for South Korea: not to reject, but to 'adapt rather than adopt'. In Japan, for example, Samimy & Kobayashi (2004: 258) propose that 'English education should embrace CLT in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way, yet maintain its own contextual autonomy'. Rao (1996: 467) discusses ways of 'reconciling the traditional Chinese approach and the communicative approach'. Viewing East Asia as a whole, Wong & Ho (2004: 464) perceive 'an extensive cross-breeding of elements drawn from different ELT techniques, methods and approaches to form a localized methodology that supports the effective teaching and learning of English'.

Some reports tell how this 'adaptation' or 'cross-breeding' take place. Reference was made above to Ho's (2004: 26) finding that in general, CLT in East Asia is interpreted not in a 'strong' sense but in a less radical sense of providing communicative activities as an additional element and giving learners opportunities to practise the language skills. In Hong Kong, Morris et al. (1996: 115) observed how many teachers reinterpreted the use of communicative tasks as 'the contextualised practice of discrete items' rather than activities in which learners negotiate meaning independently of the teacher. Carless (2004) found a similar situation in his case study. In Mitchell & Lee's (2003) study of an English teacher of French and a Korean teacher of English, both teachers express commitment to the communicative approach but appear to interpret this in a similar way to the Hong Kong teachers: 'Teacher-led interaction, and the mastery of correct language models, took priority over the creative language use and student centring which have been associated with more fluency-oriented or "progressivist" interpretations of the communicative approach' (p. 56). As a final example, Zheng & Adamson (2003) analyze how Mr Yang, a secondary school teacher in Mainland China, 'reconciles his pedagogy with the innovative methodology in a context constrained by examination requirements and the pressure of time' (p. 323). He does this by 'expanding his repertoire rather than rejecting previous approaches' (p. 335). He maintains many traditional elements of a 'structural' approach, such as his own role as a knowledge transmitter, the provision of grammatical explanations, and the use of memorization techniques and pattern drills. However, he integrates new ideas into his pedagogy by including more interaction and more creative responses from the students in his classes, 'usually in the context provided by the textbook, but sometimes in contexts derived from the students' personal experience' (p. 331).

Carless (2004: 659) points out that adaptation or reinterpretation, as in the instances above, is a natural part of the innovation process: 'teachers mould innovations to their own abilities, beliefs and experiences; the immediate school context; and the wider sociocultural environment'. This echoes Widdowson's (1989) observation that 'the influence of ideas does not depend on their being understood in their own [terms; usually], it depends on their being recast in different terms to suit other conditions of relevance' (cited in Ho & Wong 2004: xxxv). The instances mentioned in the previous paragraph illustrate some of the ways in which teachers in East Asia have recast elements of the communicative approach 'to suit other conditions of relevance'.

4. Some conceptual uncertainties that need to be resolved

The previous section focused on practical aspects of the implementation of CLT and TBLT in East Asia. Underlying these practical concerns, however, there is often a deeper uncertainly about what the approaches actually mean in terms of methodology. Ho & Wong (2004: xxxiv) state how CLT has been implemented in different ways in East Asia, 'with the term almost meaning different things to different English teachers'. One of the secondary school teachers interviewed by D. F. Li (1998: 689) illustrates two aspects of this uncertainty: 'Before attending this teacher education program, I thought that communicative language teaching does not teach grammar and only teaches speaking'. C. Y. Li (2003) conducted a survey of 164 teachers in Mainland China and found a similar misconception that CLT can have no place for grammar and focuses only on speaking: 'Some teachers have a misunderstanding of CLT. In their view CLT is just a plethora of speaking activities without any learning of language structures' (p. 76).

These are common conceptions in other contexts too. Thompson (1996) reports that two of the most common misconceptions that he has encountered amongst teachers from different parts of the world are that CLT means not teaching grammar and that CLT means teaching only speaking. The expectations that these misconceptions imply would be unsettling to most teachers, not only to those in East Asian contexts.

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In TBLT, the same uncertainties are carried forward but they are compounded by further conceptual uncertainties. The most serious of these is the definition of the central concept of 'task' itself and what activities are (or are not) included in it. As Richards (2005: 33) puts it, the notion of task is 'a somewhat fuzzy one'. Carless (2004) reports, from his own study and also citing other sources, that teachers in Hong Kong have difficulty in interpreting tasks and that their interpretations do not usually coincide with that proposed by the curriculum documents. The present writer, in the early days of the introduction of a task-based curriculum at national level in Hong Kong, experienced many hours in which the change agents and eventual implementers argued inconclusively about what a task is and what a task is not.

Since the concept of 'task' is unclear, so too is the distinction between tasks and non-tasks which teachers are asked to operationalize. The latter are often called 'exercises' (e.g. in Nunan 1999, Ellis 2003, and some official curricula). In the Hong Kong curriculum for English, for example, tasks are defined as activities in which 'learners are provided with purposeful contexts where they can learn and use English . . . for meaningful communication' (Curriculum Development Council 2002: 24) whilst exercises are activities in which '[learners] focus upon and practise specific elements of knowledge, skills and strategies needed for the task' (Curriculum Development Council 1999: 44). This does not make clear the status of that important range of activities in which there is an element of 'meaningful communication' but the purpose is also to 'practise specific elements' of the language, such as information-gap tasks or the contextualized practice observed by Morris et al. (1996) and Carless (2004). Since it is that middle range that provides not only an essential conceptual link between communicative 'tasks' and non-communicative 'exercises', but also a pedagogical link between what is familiar to most teachers and the new ideas they are being asked to adopt in CLT and TBLT, this oversimplified division is an obstacle both to conceptual clarity and to effective implementation.

The need for a more differentiated conceptual framework was observed by Morris et al. (1996), who found the task-exercise distinction too limiting. They needed a middle category, which they called 'exercise-tasks' (the contextualized practice of discrete items), to capture the features of what they observed in classrooms in Hong Kong. It is noticeable that Nunan (2004) too has moved from the two-category distinction in Nunan (1999) to a three-category framework of 'tasks', 'communicative activities' and 'exercises'.

The present writer, in work in teacher education in Hong Kong as well as workshops elsewhere in East Asia, prefers to go further and adopt the five-category framework described in Littlewood (2003, 2004, 2005). These five categories, outlined below, range along a continuum from activities which focus on discrete forms with no attention to meaning, through activities in which there is still focus on form but meaning and communication are also important, to activities in which the focus is clearly on the communication of meanings.

(i) At the most form-focused end of the continuum is NON-COMMUNICATIVE LEARNING, which includes, for example, grammar exercises, substitution drills and pronunciation drills.
(ii) We then move to PRE-COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICE, in which the focus is still primarily on language but also oriented towards meaning. An example of this is the familiar 'question-and-answer' practice, in which the teacher asks questions to which everyone knows the answer.
(iii) With the third category, COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICE, we come to activities in which learners still work with a predictable range of language but use it to convey information. These include, for example, activities in which learners use recently taught language as a basis for information exchange or to conduct a survey amongst their classmates.
(iv) In the fourth category, STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION, the main focus moves to the communication of meanings, but the teacher structures the situation to ensure that learners can cope with it with their existing language resources, including perhaps what they have recently used in more form-focussed work. This category includes more complex information-exchange activities or structured role-playing tasks.
(v) Finally, at the most meaning-oriented end of the continuum, AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION comprises activities in which there is the strongest focus on the communication of messages and the language forms are correspondingly unpredictable. Examples are discussion, problem-solving, content-based tasks and larger-scale projects.

For teachers accustomed to a tradition dominated by controlled, form-oriented activities, the framework provides dimensions for innovation and expansion. They can maintain their base in activities represented in the first and second categories, but gradually expand their repertoire into the other three. In this way they can grow but retain a sense of security and value in what they have done before. We saw above how Mr Yang achieved this in his pedagogy. One reason why CLT and TBLT have often been resisted, both in East Asia and elsewhere, has been that its proponents have been seen as wishing to 'catapult' teachers from the first and second categories straight into the fifth, without concern either for the teachers' previous experience or indeed (as argued persuasively by Swan 2005) for what we know reliably about the

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conditions which facilitate efficient language learning and teaching in classrooms.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have seen some of the concerns of teachers in East Asia related to CLT and TBLT, as well as how they have adapted and integrated the new ideas to suit their own situation. The experience has been viewed from the perspective of East Asian teachers. By way of conclusion, we may note that this experience can also be viewed – from a more global and theoretical perspective – as one instance of what is sometimes called our 'post-method condition' in language pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu 2006) and the associated need for a 'context approach' (Bax 2003). There is now widespread acceptance that no single method or set of procedures will fit all teachers and learners in all contexts. Teachers can draw on the ideas and experiences of others but cannot simply adopt them as ready-made recipes: they need to trust their own voice and develop a pedagogy suited to their own specific situations. In this paper we have seen some of the ways in which this need is being addressed in East Asian classrooms.

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