Communicative Language Teaching and Confucianism in China and Taiwan

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Communicative Language Teaching has been applied to English teaching in both China and Taiwan since the 1970s. However, several factors constrained the application of such a method in both places. Confucianism has been considered as among the cultural and academic factors that lead to standard entrance examination and authoritative way of teaching and constrain the application of Communicative Language Teaching as well as democratic way of teaching in both China and Taiwan. Such an argument is challenged in this paper. The author argues that Confucianism has been taken by authoritative Confucians as well as power holders in China and Taiwan as a tool to manipulate thought, maintain power and bring standard entrance examination and authoritative ways of teaching. Political factor, instead of Confucianism, constrains Communicative Language Teaching as well as democratic ways of teaching in both China and Taiwan. China and Taiwan are proceeding in different tempos in dealing with the political factor to enhance democratization and educational modernization. Different tempos of political development in both places influence the application of Communicative Language Teaching and democratic ways of teaching differently and may bring different results.

Communicative Language Teaching

Many researchers have discussed Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) but few offer the definition of CLT. In Canale and Swain (1980), the classic work on the theoretical basis of CLT, the discussion related to the definition of CLT is, "with respect to teaching methodology, it is crucial that classroom activities reflect, in the most optimally direct manner, those communication activities that the learner is most likely to engage in... Furthermore, communication activities must be as meaningful as possible and be characterized (at increasing levels of difficulty) by aspects of genuine communication such as its basis in social interaction, the relative creativity and unpredictability of utterances, its purposefulness and goal-orientation, and its authenticity" (Canale and Swain 1980, p. 33). Savignon (1991) mentions, "communicative language teaching (CLT) has become a term for methods and curricula that embrace both the goals and the processes of classroom learning, for teaching practice that views competence in terms of social interaction and looks to further language acquisition research to account for its development" (p. 263). Berns (1990) explains that in CLT, "language teaching is based on a view of language as communication, that is, language is seen as a social tool which speakers use to make meaning; speakers communicate about something to someone for some purpose, either orally or in writing" (p. 104). Accordingly, I would like to take CLT as a way of teaching in which the application of communicative activities and target language aims to develop learners’ competence of understanding and exchanging different ideas, behavioral modes, values, beliefs and cultures.
Since the 1970s, CLT methodology has been used in language teaching and it did play a significant role in many countries; however, researchers criticized it in several aspects. Nunan (1988) stresses that there are weak and strong versions of CLT and argues that the weak version of CLT incorporates communicative activities into language learning and the strong version focuses on language activities which "require learners to do in class what they will have to do outside" (Nunan 1988, p. 26, quoted in Santoro 2000, p. 47).

Further, researchers present some problems with CLT. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997) argue that the problems with CLT appear because (1) "the lack of firm linguistic guidelines led to a diversity of communicative approaches", (2) "current communicative testing methods fail to provide sufficient precision" and (3) in CLT, "the linguistic form is learned incidentally rather than as a result of focusing directly on linguistic form, …and CLT is not in accordance with the principles of cognitive psychology" (pp. 143-45). In addition, Santoro (2000) argues that CLT teaching materials are not "representative enough of real language" (p. 47).

Nevertheless, communicative activities have displayed at least four characteristics: (1) "They provide whole-task practice"; (2) "They improve motivation"; (3) "They allow natural learning"; (4) They can create a context which supports learning" (Littlewood 1981, pp.17-18). Additionally, Littlewood (1981) claims that in CLT, teachers are no longer inhibitors and anxiety producers and students are no longer followers (pp. 44-62; pp. 92-94). This implies that CLT may help foster democratic interaction between teachers and students.

Besides, when discussing the nature of CLT, Savignon (1991) claims, "the terms that best represent the collaborative nature of what goes on are interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning" (p. 262). Further, Savignon implies that in CLT, learners "participate in the negotiation of meaning" and "the communicative competence needed for participation includes not only grammatical competence, but pragmatic competence" (Savignon 1991, p. 262). Savignon (1991) helps us understand that CLT aims to develop learners' competence in exchanging the social and cultural meanings via the contexts carried in the target language. In addition, as CLT fosters "learner choice and increasing autonomy " (Candlin 1978, quoted in Savignon 1991, p. 264), offers chances for learners to "interact with other speakers" and "muster to negotiate meaning " (Savignon 1991, p. 264), and the activities applied in CLT are usually related to "turn-taking and topic management, with generalizations regarding the degree of learner participation and initiative " (Savignon 1991, pp. 271-72), it is possible to apply CLT to help shape democratic attitudes.

What’s more, according to Berns (1990), CLT leads us to consider the function of language as the exchange of meanings related to social and cultural values. When using the same language, English, for example, different people with different cultural backgrounds from different places might display the language (English) in different ways because of the influences from people’s different backgrounds. Nevertheless, the purpose of using a language eventually is to exchange understandings about other people’s ideas, attitudes, values and culture. Language education, therefore, does not only transfer the knowledge of sounds, words or sentences of the language, but also transfer the ways of thinking, the habits, the behavior and the attitudes contained in the culture expressed by the users via the language. What CLT aims at is related to the development of communicative competence, which plays a very important role in the development of democratic attitudes. The problems with CLT cannot deny the fact that CLT tends to help shape democratic attitudes and could serve as teaching methodology as well as provide skills for democratic teaching.
CLT and its Constraints in China

When CLT is applied in Taiwan, the issues of democratic teaching and CLT in Taiwan usually raise the following question, "In Taiwan, is CLT changed or constrained because of the influence of Confucianism since Confucianism has been taken as the dogma of Chinese education for thousands of years?"

To help understand what happened in Taiwan and answer the above question, I would like to begin with the discussion of some findings about CLT in China. Hui (1997) reveals that communicative language teaching has met some constraints in China and considers five factors, economic, administrative, cultural, population, and academic, as the causes of constraints.

Economic factors refer to the constraints caused by the lack of financial support. According to Hui (1997), Burnaby and Sun (1989) and Rao (1996), low payment for teachers and the inefficiency of office and teaching equipment such as copying machines, overhead projectors and computers are among the economic factors constraining the application of communicative way of language teaching in most public schools in China. This is more or less related to administrative factors.

Population is also a factor constraining CLT because it is quite common that there are fifty to sixty students in an English classroom in China and the class size constrains the effects of CLT activities and degrades the quality of teaching. Even though such methods as group discussion, pair work and language labs might help resolve some of the problems appearing in a large class, population factors keep on threatening the teaching quality of language education.

Academic factors refer to both the insufficient qualified English teachers and English teachers who either do not know CLT methods or do not support CLT. Some teachers’ preference to stay with the Grammar-translation Method (Davies & Pearse 2000) intensifies because of their lack of knowledge and ability to apply CLT. As a result, a negative cycle grows and brings more constraints on CLT.

Before Hui’s research, similar factors had also been discussed by different researchers who claimed that lack of copiers, lack of teaching materials, unqualified English teachers, administrators who know little about English teaching and CLT, students’ and even some teachers’ preferences for traditional grammar-focused way of teaching, the pressure from college entrance examination and too many students in an English classroom all constrain the possibility of applying CLT in China (Burnaby and Sun 1989; Rao 1996).

Generally speaking, academic factors, which constrain the application of CLT, might be related to cultural factors. However, it seems improper to attribute the academic and cultural problems of education in both China and Taiwan to Confucianism (Lee 1996). I found no evidence proving that Confucius generated the civil examination in Taiwan or standard entrance examinations in both China and Taiwan. Nor did I find evidence proving that Confucius advocated such ideas as examination-orientated learning or authoritative teaching in both China and Taiwan.

The fatal factors, constraining communicative language teaching and democratic teaching especially in China but rarely mentioned even by researchers in China, are political factors (Paine 1992, p.204). The authoritarian political system and the burden of population in China constrain its educational modernization as well as the application of communicative teaching (Burnaby and Sun 1989; Hui 1997; Paine 1992; Rao 1996).
**CLT and its Constraints in Taiwan**

Compared to what happened in China, in academic factors, Taiwan might share similar constraints with China because of the constraints of standard entrance examinations and authoritative way of teaching in both places (Smith 1997; Paine 1992).

Before the educational reform in Taiwan began in the early 1990s, an English language teacher in Taiwan might have chances to shape students’ attitudes toward democracy, but what I consider the problems of education in Taiwan kept on challenging such influences. A teacher in Taiwan usually confronted the following problems: (1) authoritative ways of teaching dominated most fields of teaching at schools in Taiwan, (2) standard entrance examinations for students to enter schools beyond the level of junior high confined the curriculum development of most fields of teaching, including that of English language teaching, (3) educational policy making followed the needs of potential military operations, offensive or defensive (Bullard 1997), and deterred the democratic development in Taiwan.


**Authoritative Ways of Teaching**

Arnold Sprenger, former Dean of the College of Foreign Languages at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei for many years, provided an acute and convincing description and interpretation about the problems of students in Fu Jen University. In his discussion quoted in Smith (1997), several issues are related to communicative language teaching as well as democratic teaching in Taiwan. The first problem Sprenger observed is that the method of intellectual training in Taiwan before 1982 made "teachers talk and the students listen" (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p.127). Such an authoritative way of teaching deprived students of the chances for learning to be systematic, independent and critical (See also Brooks 1997, p. 13). Further, Sprenger added, "strategies for judging and discussing texts, how to make the best use of them, in short, how to translate experience and knowledge of other human beings contained in abstract written texts into their own realm of understanding, knowledge, and decision-making, are left to the individual student" (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p. 129). This explains the difficulty of applying communicative language teaching in most of the schools in Taiwan before 1982.

More technically speaking, because of such a teacher-centered authoritative way of teaching, there is "...no intercommunication among the students," "...cooperation is difficult to achieve. Subjectivism and egoism seem unavoidable..." (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p.131). That is, the chances of developing such essential attributes of democratic attitudes as autonomy, commonality, and tolerance rarely existed. As Sprenger suggests, after students are educated with such an authoritative way of teaching, "the result is too often deepening alienation, feelings of helplessness, social indifference, intellectual and psychological instability, irrational behavior and egoism" (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p.131).
**Standard Entrance Examinations**

Standard entrance examinations in both tertiary and high school levels in Taiwan caused the second problem of education. Though the examinations in both levels were abolished in June of 2001, they have long confined the focus of curriculum development and teaching methodology in Taiwan to the preparation for passing the standard entrance examinations and restrained the possibilities of democratic teaching as well as communicative language teaching in Taiwan. A fact accompanying standard entrance examinations and constraining the development of students’ democratic attitudes is that "students in Taiwan who fail in the entrance examination—and they are always in the majority—are automatically characterized as second rate" (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p.132). Besides, an unavoidable side effect is the harm brought to students' body and psychology. As Sprenger stated, "the joint college entrance examination also fosters a psychological and social maladjustment through its pitting of student against student, teacher against teacher, and school against school... The loss of true educational goals is often accompanied by anti-social feelings, selfishness, and deepening isolation or alienation of students" (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p.132).

In other factors, the situations of the constraints on CLT are different. Taiwan has proven successful in its democratization in the past 15 years (Jacob 1998; He 1996; Tien 1996; Sheridan 1999; Chao & Myers 1998; Wu 1995) because of its economic success. Also, because of the economic development in Taiwan, the constraints of economic, population, and administrative factors in education in China either did not exist or diminished year by year in Taiwan. Teachers in Taiwan have enough equipment and resources to support their teaching. The number of students in a class decreases year by year as the Ministry of Education in Taiwan aims to make the class size shrink to 30 students a class in every public school before 2003. Beginning from 2002, the posts of education administrators in the national universities in Taiwan must be taken by professional administrators instead of teacher administrators. By July 2001 one of the most serious problems caused by academic and cultural factors, the standard entrance examinations in all levels of schools in Taiwan began to disappear because the educational reform beginning in 1994 aimed to abolish all levels of standard entrance examinations in Taiwan (Smart and Ang 1995, p. 18).

**Confucianism, Authoritative Ways of Teaching and Standard Examinations**

The two issues of the problems of education in Taiwan, authoritative ways of teaching and standard entrance examinations, if deliberated, could be attributed to the cultural factors discussed in Hui (1997). However, should these two problems, then, be attributed to the influence of Confucianism? There is no evidence claiming that either Confucius demanded that "teachers talk and students listen" (Sprenger 1982 quoted in Smith 1997, p.127) or was against critical thinking. Instead, the evidence shows that Confucius said, "Seeing knowledge without thinking is labour lost; thinking without seeking knowledge is perilous" [Analects II.15] (quoted in Lee 1996, p.34). Even the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi in Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279) argued, "the [Confucian] emphasis on reflective thinking in learning requires a spirit of enquiry and open-mindedness" (Lee 1996, p.35). Furthermore, an ideal Chinese teacher understands that "Guiding without pulling makes the process of learning gentle; urging without suppressing makes the process of learning easy; and opening the way without leading the students to the place makes them think for themselves. Now if the process of learning is made gentle and easy and the students are encouraged to think for themselves, we may call the man a good teacher" (Lin 1938, p. 247 quoted in Lee 1996, p.36). Chinese students, accordingly, "...are encouraged to think for themselves" (Lin 1938, p.247 quoted in Lee 1996, p.36). Such words confirm that Confucianism does not propose the teaching of suppressing critical thinking.
Furthermore, no evidence confirms that Confucianism generated the standard examinations in China. On the contrary, some Confucius’ followers took both Confucius’ and Mencius’ words to justify their advocacy for the civil examination by interpreting Confucius’ and Mencius’ words as "... if there is a person who has cultivated himself sufficiently well, he should seek to influence the outside world. Hence... a scholar should ultimately seek the opportunity to obtain a government office, in order to extend his good influence" (Lee 1996, P.37). Some Confucius’ followers or the emperors in the ancient time and even some Confucius’ followers in modern China had interpreted and made the "opportunity" as the civil examination for their ambitions of power-seeking or power-consolidating. The interpretation has made Confucius the scapegoat of one of the problems of education in China, the standard examinations for civil services or school entrances, for nearly two thousand years.

However, as early as in the 12th century, not only did Su Shi, one of the most discussed Song (A.D.960-1279) literati in the twenty-first century Sinology, criticized such examination-orientated learning as "having deprived learners’ individuality and creativity" (Lee 1996, p.34), but also did Zhu Xi as well as other Neo-Confucians stand against it (Tu 1992, p.67). Even in Qing dynasty, academies also attacked such examination-orientated learning as lack of critical thinking (Tu 1992, p.78).

The civil examinations applied in Asian countries, on the one hand, have offered chances of social upward mobility for many common people in at least China, Japan and Korea and has been taken by most members in Asian families and societies as an equal chance to seek a better future (Lee 1996, pp.37-39). On the other hand, the interpretation of such an "opportunity" helped form the standard entrance examinations in almost every level of schools, at least in Taiwan, in the past 50 years. It is one of the roots of the problems of education, including the problem of English education in Taiwan. The standard entrance examinations obviously constrain the possibility of the application of communicative language teaching and democratic teaching in most schools in Taiwan.

In a word, no evidence acquired proves that Confucius generated the civil examination or advocated such an idea of examination-orientated learning as brought in both China and Taiwan; his followers or some Chinese ancient emperors who interpreted Confucius saying with personal or authoritative ambition might have done so (Lee 1996, p.37; Cleverley 1991, p.11; Zhu 1992, pp.3-22). Lu Xun, one of the most respected writers in modern China, also reminded of the misinterpretation of Confucius when he said, "...it was those in authority who boosted Confucius in China, making him the sage of those in power and those anxious to take power..." (quoted in Zhu 1992, p.19). Naming Confucius as the Sage and then burdening Confucius’ works such as Four Books as required items in the civil examination were some political activists’ Machiavellian dexterity of controlling power and avoiding the defamation of hypocrisy in Chinese history.

In Tu (1992), Ezra Vogel argued, "in Korea and Taiwan, modern examinations were introduced by the Japanese during occupation" (p.62). Yet, a careful examination of the institution of Chinese modern educational policy between 1938 and 1944 will help locate the origin of standard entrance examinations and authoritative teaching in Taiwan after 1949 (Ch’en 1994, p. 155-70; p. 195-98; p. 284-85) and help understand that modern political activists in China played more significant roles in the issues of standard entrance examinations and authoritative ways of teaching in modern Taiwan. This leads us to understand that political factors, instead of Confucianism, play more significant roles in constraining communicative language teaching and democratic teaching in Taiwan, or even in China.

Pennycook suggests that besides language teaching, English teachers in China try to bring a critical pedagogy to help students develop critical way of thinking (Pennycook 1994).
Though some educators in China, especially those in Guangdong and Shanghai, already began their reforms toward educational privatization that challenged socialist ideology and sought the chances of bringing critical pedagogy to China, Chinese Communist Party is still unwilling to proceed widespread political reforms because of its specific views about Western democracy (Mok 2000, pp. 124-51; The Independence Daily 26 April 2001). It seems that Pennycook’s suggestion of critical pedagogy was impractical in China not only in 1993 after the student movement in Tiananmen square was suppressed for no more than four years, but also in 2001 when the political, economical and social conditions in China are not ready for a Western liberal democracy yet. The literature about the democratization in both China and Taiwan reveals the facts that while Chinese Communist Party is still hesitating in its way to democratization in 2001 (The Independence Daily 26 April 2001), the opposition Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan had already been established and formally accepted by the government in Taiwan in 1986 (He 1996; Jacobs 1998, p.1-16; Tien 1996, p.3-26; Wu 1996, pp. 33-44) and won the post of President in 2000. The facts urge us to further explore the relation among English language teaching, CLT, critical pedagogy and democratization in both China and Taiwan.

It would be interesting to understand what would actually happen to CLT and English language teaching in both China and Taiwan in the future. The result of further research about the establishment of a critical pedagogy of English teaching, the development of democratic way of teaching and the interrelationship of such a pedagogy and democratic way of teaching in both Taiwan and China might help understand the future development of English teaching as well as the roles English teachers are going to play in both Taiwan and China. The exchanges of the English teaching experiences in both Taiwan and China might also help promote more successful English teaching in the future.
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