

Theory into Practice: Grounded Theory Approach to Beginning Teachers' Perspectives of Communicative Language Teaching Practice

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Abstract

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has become the prevailing language teaching methodology across the world. However, the process about the beginning language teacher's application of CLT in teaching foreign language is not yet explored in past research. This paper reports the use of CLT through the beginning Mandarin teacher's perspectives. A grounded theory approach is employed as the research methodology. Data was collected from interviews of eight beginning Mandarin teachers. Major findings suggest a three-dimension explication for the beginning teachers' practice of CLT in teaching Mandarin as a foreign language. The epistemic dimension indicates the beginning Mandarin teachers' concepts of CLT; the perceptual dimension reveals the teacher's concerns of CLT as against their preferences, teaching objectives and surroundings; and the situational dimension explicates the teacher's adaptation of CLT in their particular teaching situations. It argues that the integral, emergent process of the three dimensions demonstrates a process of beginning teachers' transmission of the CLT theory into practice.

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the beginning teacher may confront considerable challenges in their professional development. Johnson (2006) suggested that the most difficult challenge for beginning teachers is how to use educational theories into their teaching practice. This paper explores the challenge faced by the beginning language teachers who have just started their teaching career for no more than two years, in terms of using communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in teaching Chinese as a foreign language in Australian schools.

This paper argues that the use of CLT involves the teacher's perspectives in a process of understanding, perceiving, and situating CLT. In other words, from theory to practice, the beginning Mandarin teacher's interpretations about the use of CLT emerge in these three dimensions. 'Understanding CLT' reflects the teacher's perspectives of the language approach in the epistemic dimension; 'perceiving CLT' indicates their perspectives in the perceptual dimension; 'situating CLT' reveals their perspectives in the situational dimension. These three dimensions are not separately functioning in shaping the teacher's use of CLT. Rather, they are working dynamically to shape the teacher's CLT practice. Hence, the paper reports a ground theory approach for development of a theoretical framework to understand the beginning Mandarin teacher's use of CLT, and suggests employing the framework in a wider context where the theory-practice gap of a particular field could be understood.

Literature Review

The theoretical basis of CLT resides in the epistemologies of language and language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). CLT adopts the view towards language as a communication tool. This orients CLT as a means for developing 'communicative competence', which Hymes (1972) depicts as "an ability when to speak, when not, and...what to talk about, with whom, when, where, and in what manner" (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 227). Thus, CLT is a language approach that sees language as a tool for the maintenance of social relations.

Since the interactive view on the nature of language fits with the learners' communicative needs, CLT has become the dominant model in language teaching context (Celce-Murcia et al., 1997). For example, educators and governments actively increase the number of English speakers in East Asia by promoting CLT in language policies and syllabuses (Littlewood, 2006). Yet, even though second language (L2) teachers are encouraged to use CLT in their language classrooms, the majority of them seem to have failed to deliver the genuinely communicative instruction (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Li, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). The outcome in the foreign language teaching context is also not promising. Taking the English subject for example, the efficacy of using CLT in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) remains a controversial topic (Sampson, 1984; Maley, 1984; Harvey, 1985; Cooke, 1986; Anderson, 1993; Penner, 1995; Li, 1998). More recently, due to the legacy of second language teaching in the 1990s, the question that whether and to what extent students' first language (L1) needs to be shadowed or muted in second/foreign language teaching context has yet been resolved (Hinkel, 2006; Kang, 2008). This kind of confusion has direct impact on teachers' use of CLT. Critiques of the division between target language and students' first language suggest that the exclusive use of target language in teaching is inconsistent with the pedagogical implications derived from recent studies in cognitive psychology and applied linguistics (Cummins, 2007). Rather, a set of bilingual instructional strategies are promoted as a productive way working together with monolingual strategies. Crawford (2004) also has found the important role of L1 as the appropriate medium for cross-lingual and cross-cultural comparisons. Although recent studies seem to have shifted from this part of discussion to the reconceptualisation of language teaching by introducing the concept of "inter-cultural language teaching approach" (Scarino, 1999-2000; Harbon & Browett, 2006; Atay, et al, 2009), concerns of CLT in teaching language other than English have remained insufficiency. Thus, before we are ready to follow the new concepts flooding in the field, perhaps there is a need of re-understanding CLT in the context such as teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

It is believed that teachers' using of CLT in their classroom teaching is not merely determined by their knowledge of CLT learned from teacher education courses. Rather, it is a dynamic and complex process in which their perspectives of practice could be shaped by both the professional

knowledge and the experiences in practice. For example, the teacher may confront tensions in class. Tensions in the form of discomfort or confusion are “divergences among different forces or elements in the teacher’s understanding of the school context, the subject matter, or the students” (Freeman, 1993, p. 488). In a study about the beginning teacher’s struggles in teaching (Romano, 2008), four major areas are identified that the beginning teachers concern most. These sources of struggles include classroom management, external policy, personal issues, and content and pedagogy. Classroom management refers to the issues of student behaviour and the tensions of applying appropriate techniques to motivate students’ learning and encourage their participation in the teaching-learning process. External policy means external factors such as the content of syllabus that the teachers feel the incapability to control. Personal issues indicate the teacher’s concerns and emotions such as the feeling of being secure in surroundings. Content and pedagogy refer to the tensions emerging from the mastery of a particular content area and teaching strategies. These sources of struggles can be the major factors affecting the beginning teachers’ practice of the CLT approach in their classroom teaching, which was explored by this study.

Research methodology notes

This study employs the constructivist grounded theory approach to study the beginning teachers’ perspectives of CLT in the Mandarin teaching context. Since the teacher’s perspectives of CLT are highly personal that the uniqueness and divisiveness cannot be simply grasped by predefined conceptual frameworks, the grounded theory approach is feasible for the research enquiry. Like the classical grounded theory that emphasises the generation of theory from empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the constructivist grounded theory provides a way of constructing sociological reality by means of eliciting and organising analytical and theoretical categories from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory offers a flexible research method for this study in which the analysis and data collection processes proceed simultaneously and uses emergent categories to shape subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 1990).

The participants of this study were nine beginning Chinese language teachers. Two were qualified classroom teachers and seven were volunteer teachers. Concerning of their language background, eight out of nine teachers are non-native speakers of English from China, while one teacher is an Australian citizen with Chinese heritage background. All of the teachers had taught Mandarin as a foreign language in the Western Sydney region for less than two years. All research participants were used pseudonyms. Regarding their education background, the qualified teachers hold the Masters Teaching degrees with the completion of the teacher education course in Australia. The course contained the content of modern language teaching methodologies in which the CLT approach was included. As for the volunteer teachers, all of them had attended the language

methodology training program provided by the Department of Education and Training of the New South Wales in 2010. The weekly-based, three-month training program included topics such as the background of language approaches, the communicative language teaching approach, practical classroom teaching strategies, Mandarin language teaching, the NSW quality teaching framework, and the school observations.

Interview was selected as the key method to collect data for the study, because semi-structured interviews with well-planned and open-ended questions fit the grounded theory approach well. The open-ended and non-judgmental questions in semi-structured interviews can encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge which are essential to the theory generation (Charmaz, 2006). The design of interview questions was advised by Scheele and Groeben's (1988, cited in Flick, 2009) elaboration of interview questions along with the relevant literature about the CLT approach. Three types of questions are proposed by Scheele and Groeben, they are open questions, theory-driven, hypotheses-directed questions, and confrontational questions. Each type of question served a different purpose for the study. The open questions brought out things like teaching objectives, the basis of CLT knowledge, and the perception of CLT that the beginning teachers may have immediately at hand. These questions included such as "What is your general goal and personal belief in teaching Mandarin?"; "What is your understanding about this teaching methodology (CLT)?" and "How do you think of the CLT approach or teaching foreign language in a communicative way?" The theory-driven or hypotheses-directed questions were largely based on the literature of CLT practice and the researchers' assumptions from emergent evidence. Questions such as "What activities do you usually do with your students?" "How do you think of the teaching methodology that can be used in Mandarin class?" and "How do you think of the CLT approach that can facilitate or constrain your engagement with students?" The third type, confrontational questions, enabled the researchers to check and reconfirm previous statements the participants had made. These questions were usually unstructured and emerged throughout the interview when the participants made unclear points or the researchers needed more specific information.

The constant comparative process was used throughout the analysis of the interview data. The comparative method allows the researchers "1) to compare data with data from the beginning of the research, not after all the data are collected, 2) to compare data with emerging categories, and 3) to demonstrate relationships between concepts and categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 23). Table 1 illustrates the key themes of the study which were generated either at a manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at a latent level (underlying the phenomenon) (Saldaña, 2009).

Table 1 Key themes generated from codes

Key Themes	Main codes
Understanding CLT as colloquial instructions	CLT means communicating in Chinese; CLT means creating target language environment; CLT means using fun activities;
Insufficient knowledge in CLT practice	Lack of CLT strategies;
Favouring CLT	Past learning experience; Meeting syllabus requirement; Recognising the importance of target language environment;
Conflicting with teaching objectives	Aiming for teaching grammar; Aiming for teaching culture; Aiming for teaching Chinese characters; Aiming for developing student interests;
Losing the students	Noticing student resistance; Perceiving Chinese is challenging; Perceiving CLT challenges students;
Promoting learning;	Striving for instructional opportunities; Developing interesting language activities;
Sub-theme: Creating comfortable environment	teaching cultural activities; Concerning of learning habits;
Promoting learning;	Simplifying learning content; Making clear instruction;
Sub-theme: Reducing learning difficulties	
Adapting self	Changing teaching objectives; Lowering expectations;
Maintaining the status quo	Noticing problems in promoting learning; Using traditional teaching methods;

Through writing and rewriting, the researchers moved the analysis to a theoretical level where three major conceptual categories were emerging. The categories in terms of understanding CLT, perceiving CLT, and situating CLT serve as three dimensions for explicating the process of applying CLT from theory to practice. Table 3 demonstrates the generation of the key categories from the empirical data.

Table 3 Categories emerging from themes

Key categories	Key themes	Main codes
Understanding CLT	Understanding CLT as colloquial instructions	CLT means communicating in Chinese; CLT means creating target language environment; CLT means using fun activities;
	Insufficient knowledge in CLT practice	Lack of CLT strategies;
Perceiving CLT	Favouring CLT	Past learning experience;

		Meeting syllabus requirement; Recognising the importance of target language environment;
	Conflicts in teaching objectives	Aiming for teaching grammar; Aiming for teaching culture; Aiming for teaching Chinese characters; Aiming for developing student interests;
	Conflicts in losing the students	Noticing student resistance; Perceiving Chinese is challenging; Perceiving CLT challenges students;
Situating CLT	Promoting learning;	Striving for instructional opportunities; Developing interesting language activities;
	Sub-theme: Creating comfortable environment	Teaching cultural activities; Concerning of learning habits;
	Promoting learning;	Simplifying learning content; Making clear instruction;
	Sub-theme: Reducing learning difficulties	
	Adapting self	Changing teaching objectives; Lowering expectations;
	Maintaining the status quo	Noticing problems in promoting learning; Using traditional teaching methods;

Findings and discussion

This study has generated a substantive theory to depict the process of applying CLT from theory to practice. Detailed propositions in each category are presented below.

Beginning teachers' incomprehensiveness and misconception in understanding CLT

Understanding CLT refers to the teacher's knowledge about the CLT approach. The teacher acquires the knowledge of CLT from sources such as teacher educators, language courses, and the demonstration from experienced teachers. These sources have informed their perspectives about the CLT. These perspectives include features such as incomprehensiveness and misconception about the language approach. It is found that most teachers interviewed tend to regard CLT as a language approach exclusively for teaching the colloquial aspect of a language, namely the speaking and listening skills.

I think it's [CLT] necessary in teaching, because language is a living thing, and language is not only about a written form such as literature, it's also about oral form for people to speak and communicate. (Jess, 09/08/2010)

This finding parallels past research (Thompson, 1996; Liao, 2003; Mangubhai et al., 2007). Thompson (1996) suggests one of the major misconceptions about CLT is regarding the approach as merely for teaching the spoken language. Moreover, even though some teachers have more comprehensive knowledge about CLT, few can tell a specified procedure about the CLT practice.

The first thing is language input that is the content you want to teach the students. As they learned the language content, I make them practice the learnt language by providing them with a communicative environment. The interaction in that environment could be the teacher and the students, the students themselves. The teaching objective can be achieved as long as the students are willing to speak in Mandarin under that environment. (Mike, 29/05/2010)

Thus, the CLT practice is still confined by the insufficient strategies that can be used to make CLT happen in class. For example, some beginning teachers believe that CLT not only can be used to teach the spoken but also the written language. They have created some ideas about using CLT to teach reading and writing activities. Yet, in reality the CLT practice only happens when they speak Chinese for creating the target language environment.

How can we combine the Chinese writing system with CLT practice? I suggest that, maybe we can [make] some adaptations in CLT. Usually, we use CLT in oral communication because we make the oral language as the medium, and we can make the Chinese characters as the medium language for communication as well. This is also communicative language teaching, but I think it's very hard in practice to combine Chinese characters with CLT. (Mike, 29/05/2010)

Another interrelating problem with incomprehensiveness is their misconceptions towards the language approach. Taking their perspectives about the role of fun activities for example, some teachers regard the use of fun activities as the CLT practice, while some do not agree with this point.

Before [when I was] learning studying in a Master's degree, I've heard of this [approach], which the teachers have told [us] some methods. And there are teachers emphasising on the audio-lingual method and having fun in the game. (Michelle, 13/08/2010)

Well, obviously I did not use that [the CLT practice] in the writing section and not the activity (language games) after writing section. I use CLT most at the beginning of the class like giving them instruction to let them settle down. I will not say stand properly or other in English, I will say it in Chinese like say “把你的包放下 (put away your bag)”; “两只手放在旁边 (put your hands aside)”; “站好 (stand properly)”; “同学们好 (hello, students)” and let them greet back and say “老师好 (hello, teacher)”. (Cindy, 16/05/2010)

Both perspectives have some bias about the language approach and these misinterpretations may derive from the knowledge sources such as language courses, teacher educators, and experienced teachers' demonstrations. Whitley (1993) and Mangubhai et al. (2007) suggest that the teacher's use of CLT can be misguided by these language sources as they present the knowledge of CLT in diverse ways with varied emphasis. Diverse interpretations of the CLT approach are produced “as with the tale about the five blind men who touched separate parts of an elephant and so each described something else, the word ‘communicative’ has been applied so broadly that it has come to have different meanings for different people” (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p. 69).

Identifying conflicts and tensions in perceiving CLT

Perceiving CLT denotes the teacher's perspectives of CLT in the perceptual dimension. These involve the teacher's attitudes towards CLT and decision making about whether and how to use CLT. At first, the teachers interviewed express their preferences on CLT, namely ‘favouring CLT’. Factors such as the teacher's past learning experience and the conformity of CLT with the syllabus have induced the teacher to favour the language approach. The teacher experienced the struggle in learning English through repetitive drills and mechanical recitation. In contrast with the learning experience, the teacher regards that CLT might be different and may offer significant changes in the learning experience. They believe it a suitable language approach as the principles of CLT emphasise language learning on communicative competence which is also a norm in the language syllabus of NSW.

The second feature in perceiving CLT is the conflict between CLT and teaching objectives. This conflict suggests that the CLT practice could not completely fulfil the teacher's diverse teaching objectives. Based on the understanding of CLT, the teacher concerns the CLT approach merely can be used for listening and speaking instructions. However, other than teaching listening and speaking skills, the teacher regards that they also need to teach grammar, vocabularies, and Chinese characters that are important objectives to teach Chinese as a foreign language. Yet, they suggest that CLT could not be used for the latter purposes.

Foreign language teaching is not the same as we acquire the mother tongue that you still need to teach some grammar. ... But if you want to teach a character [or] you want to introduce some cultural content I think you still need to use English to explain these to students. (Jess, 09/08/2010)

This perception, as a result, marginalises the potential of using CLT for teaching the grammatical and structural elements of the target language. In actuality, CLT is an integrative language instruction that combines both the traditional form-focused instruction and the meaning-focused teaching (Celce-Murcia et al., 1997). The effects of using CLT for language teaching, however, can be less discernible than using other approaches regarded by the teachers.

... but in terms of reinforcing and strengthening their memory I don't think it's the approach very, in my practice, it [CLT] does not work very well. (Tracy, 22/08/2010)

This is similar to the Gatbonton and Segalowitz's (2005) findings that ascribe the modest use of CLT to its insignificant learning effects. In contrast, more traditional and direct methods, such as grammar teaching and vocabulary instruction, can provide students with more concrete and tangible learning content. As a result, the teacher has to think of traditional approaches for fulfilling their teaching objectives. Besides the language instruction, the purpose for teaching Chinese culture is also in conflict with the use of CLT. The teachers interviewed believe that learning a foreign language should not be limited to the language itself, while the non-language content such as cultural instruction also matters.

It's important to teach the language but it's also important to teach the culture and to have them expose to a foreign culture, both needs to be done, hand in hand at certain level. We do what we can do, we do according to the syllabus we teach. (Jonny, 22/06/2010)

Similarly, Sun and Cheng (2002) suggest that there are wide ramifications in the objectives of teaching and learning a foreign language. This means the instruction needs to emphasise not only on developing the language competence, but also on providing students with the cultural experience.

Moreover, the use of CLT can be influenced by the issue of learning resistance. The teacher believes that students are usually resisting learning, while the difficulty of the Chinese language

further challenges their learning. In this circumstance, the tension of 'losing the students' emerge when the teacher applies CLT to teach the target language.

Once he [student] immerses in that [target language] environment, he could lose. Once lost [in the target language environment], he will not be interested in and then totally give up the learning. (Catherine, 15/08/2010)

The kind of tension has previously been identified by Romano (2008) that the beginning teachers often face the struggles about the issues of student behaviour and personal feeling of being secure in surroundings. The teacher perceives that the application of CLT can be more difficult when students are resisting learning and this application can potentially impose the risk of losing the students. Rather than the teacher transmitting information to the learners in the traditional classroom, CLT is a learner-centred language approach that requires the learners to control their own learning in the communicative process (Song, 2009). However, the students in practice are reluctant to use Chinese in communications. Other than the reluctance, the students' destructive behaviour further impairs the use of CLT as the students do not engage in learning Chinese. As a result, the two types of learning resistance have made it difficult for the teacher to implement the CLT approach. Hence, the teacher regards CLT as more appropriate when the students are motivated and ready to learn Chinese.

Addressing the tension in situating CLT

'Situating CLT' is the third dimension in the theory-practice process. As previous research suggests, beginning teachers may have tensions of applying appropriate techniques to motivate students' learning and gain their participation in the teaching-learning process when they face the issue of student behaviour (Romano, 2008). This circumstance also applies to the teachers in this study. When the teachers are facing the tension of 'losing the students', they attempt to address the issue by employing various teaching strategies. As a result, three types of teaching strategies are identified including 'promoting learning', 'adapting self', and 'maintaining the status quo'.

Promoting learning refers to the teacher's utilisation of teaching strategies to engage students in learning. For promoting learning, the teacher has to adopt strategies including 'creating a comfortable environment' and 'reducing learning difficulties'. Firstly, the language instruction has to be situated in a comfortable learning environment.

There are lots of activities, competition games, and guessing games for example, I hold bunch of flash cards and I pick one and hide that and let them guess which cards do I

hide, and they say “爸爸 (dad)” I say “不是 (no)”, and another may guess “姐姐 (elder sister)”, I say “不是 (no)”. (Cindy, 16/05/2010)

The teacher strives for creating a comfortable learning environment by introducing interesting activities. Then, the CLT practice has to be incorporated in this process. Yet, only a few activities are compatible with the CLT instruction. The students would enjoy the interesting activities, while the language instruction and practice can be marginalised in these activities.

Secondly, the teacher needs to reduce the learning difficulties via ‘simplifying learning content’ and ‘making clear instructions’. For promoting learning, the teacher simplifies the learning content by teaching the basic language items such as vocabularies and simple sentences. Likewise, the students can feel less stressed when they practise the target language with predetermined content.

I asked them [students] to come to the stage and practice the dialogue in pairs. But when they are practising speaking, I put the enquiry and reply on the board with ‘pinyin’ and ‘hanzi’. (Catherine, 15/08/2010)

The simplified learning content, in this sense, can be in conflict with the CLT practice as the CLT instruction emphasises on the meaning exchange in a natural discourse. Therefore, these teaching strategies result in the difficulty of implementing the communicative teaching.

Besides simplifying learning content, the teacher attempts to make clear instructions. Clear instructions refer to traditional teaching practices such as the direct translation of the target language and explicit explanation of the grammatical rules. The teacher finds that students can understand these traditional teaching strategies better than the CLT practice.

The classroom teacher sometimes will help me and she did find out what I am trying to teach [when I was using CLT to instruct language]. One time I remember very well. I teach kindergarten kids last year and the classroom teacher helps me with a very traditional approach and students suddenly get it and she smiled at me and ask me it is how you do it with young kids and I’m very shocked that sometimes the basic way is used, very traditional way, [is] more useful with young kids. (Tracy, 22/08/2010)

The CLT instruction can be more difficult for the students to comprehend than other approaches such as the grammar translation method. For making clear instructions, the teacher also combines the CLT instruction with other more comprehensible strategies such as using body language.

However, the effect of the CLT practice can be impaired since the students understand the meaning largely through the body language rather than the CLT practice.

'Adapting self' is another practical strategy to cope with the tension of losing the students. In 'adapting self', the teacher lowers their expectations on students' language learning. Students are not expected to learn Chinese particularly well, while having a certain amount of basic language and Chinese cultural knowledge would be sufficient for the school students. As a result, the CLT approach cannot be fully used in practice.

Because many of students will not pick up and be fluent by the time they finish at year 7 and 8 or even year 12. Even they finish Chinese at year 12 they are not extra fluent you cannot expect them be like that, because they are come from backgrounds of those totally not Chinese at all. And it's challenge language to pick up, but hopefully, from down the track they become interested in it, they are able to pick it up by themselves just like I did, so pick it up by themselves individually and they will have to make their own decisions later on. (Jonny, 22/06/2010)

The lowered expectation further results in the change of teaching objectives. Before entering the teaching field, the teacher attempts to systematically teach the students Mandarin in terms of the four language skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, the teacher changes their teaching objectives when they find learning language not the only goal in foreign language classrooms. Based on the assumption, the teachers attempt to develop students' interests through the non-language instruction such as the teaching of Chinese culture.

When the strategies for promoting learning and adapting self are not effective in addressing the tension of losing the students, the teacher's alternative is to maintain the status quo. Maintaining the status quo attempts to keep the tension at a minimum level. As a result, students can be still resistant to learning Chinese, while their disengaging behaviour does not significantly disturb the teaching and learning process. The teaching practice for maintaining the status quo is largely non-CLT oriented. These include some quiet activities such as writing practice and listening activities. These activities usually involve mechanical rather than communicative drills. Therefore, maintaining the status quo also marginalises the use of CLT in practice.

It's really hard for them [high school students] to do some activities like 'celebrity heads'. Students don't want to go to the front and do it. So sometimes I just replace the game

with some worksheets. ... For example, I will give them a multiple-choice worksheet for practicing listening. (Kristy, 20/06/2010)

An integral view of the substantive theory

In general, the study grounded a substantive theory to depict a process about how the theory of CLT is used in actual practice from the beginning Mandarin teacher's perspectives. As discussed, the three dimensions are positioned between the theory and practice of CLT. In the epistemic dimension, knowledge about CLT is obtained from sources such as the teacher education course. However, the knowledge about CLT in the epistemic dimension is not a simple reproduction from the theory of CLT. Rather, it is the teacher's personal interpretation about the CLT practice. The personal interpretation can be either an accurate or inaccurate understanding of the original theory. However, no matter how the personal interpretation is, it becomes individual's understanding of CLT and informs the teacher's CLT practice. The perceptual dimension connects both the epistemic and situational dimension. It consists of three propositions identified from the data. 'Favouring CLT' is the result of both the teacher's understanding of CLT and their living surroundings. From their past learning experience and the requirement of the language syllabus, the teacher reveals the preference of using CLT for Mandarin teaching as they believe the principles of CLT provide a dynamic teaching and learning process and fit with the language syllabus. Likewise, the teacher's sense about the conflicts of using CLT with teaching objectives is also generated from the teacher's concerns about the knowledge of CLT and situations they live. The most significant proposition in the perceptual dimension is 'losing the students' as it is highly relevant to the teacher's strategies identified in the situational dimension. The situational dimension is the actual practice of CLT. However, the CLT practice depends on the teacher's strategies for coping with the tension of losing the students. Three types of strategies are found for addressing the tension. They are 'Promoting learning', 'adapting self', and 'maintaining the status quo'. Although the three types of strategies may not directly involve the CLT practice, their emergence in class determines how and to what extent the CLT practice can be implemented. In sum, this substantive theory explains the beginning Mandarin teacher's using CLT theory into their teaching practice.

Implications and conclusion

The substantive theory provides possible implications for language teaching in particular and teacher education in generally. First, it provides insights for the beginning language teachers. By uncovering the teacher's conceptions of CLT, pre-service teachers would understand better the facilitating and constraining factors in the application of CLT. The identified caveats about CLT in the epistemic, perceptual, and situational dimensions may help the beginning teachers build

confidence in teaching. Moreover, since this study focused on the use of CLT in the Chinese language context, it particularly helps the Chinese language teachers consider the connection between the language approach and Chinese teaching.

For language educators, the substantive theory may help them consider the teacher's concerns in teacher education courses. It may improve the pedagogical practice about the introduction of the CLT approach. For the first dimension, 'understanding CLT' implies the language educators to be cautious of the teacher's incomprehensive and misinterpreted understanding of CLT. The teacher may regard CLT as for teaching spoken language. Hence, the language educators may need to provide a comprehensive view of CLT for those teachers. The second dimension encourages the teacher education course to notice the teacher's needs. The majority of the teachers are perceptually in favour of CLT. However, they consider that the language approach may not help them to achieve their diverse teaching objectives. This can be true to certain extent, but the CLT practice can be used for accomplishing some teaching objectives such as the grammar instruction. The teacher's perception that CLT cannot be used for grammar instruction might be due to their misunderstanding of CLT and lack of sufficient CLT oriented strategies. Hence, the teacher educators could develop the language approach course by demonstrating the potential of CLT in meeting the teacher's diverse demands. The third dimension 'situating CLT' primarily situates the CLT instruction in a context where student resistance is the major issue. Most teachers interviewed suggest CLT cannot effectively engage the students in learning. Instead, they have to either use CLT in the capsule of fun activities or simply discard the language approach by utilising other strategies to promote learning. Concerning this issue, language educators who emphasises on the CLT approach, may need to develop CLT pedagogical to help the language teachers to use strategies to engage students in learning.

The substantive theory may also help to explain the issue of theory-practice gap. This gap suggests that certain theoretical knowledge cannot be completely applied in reality. Then, the three dimensions in this theory might be accountable to the theory-practice gap. The result of the gap between theory and practice could because of problems found in the epistemic dimension, namely the insufficiency or misconceptions of certain theoretical knowledge. Likewise, the perceptual or situational dimension could also affect the knowledge being fully practised in reality. Thus, the integral three dimensions can be regarded as the driving force accounting for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Based on the above explanation of theory-practice gap, there is a potential developing the substantive theory into a formal theory. The identified three dimensions for illuminating the process

of the CLT application can also imply how people apply a theory or certain knowledge in general. The process of applying certain knowledge from theory to practice could include the three dimensions identified from the teacher's perspectives of CLT. The epistemic dimension reveals the mastery of certain knowledge. In the perceptual dimension, people make decisions about the application of certain knowledge as concerning their previous knowledge, personal preferences, objectives and particular situations. The perceptual decisions include whether to apply the knowledge, to what extent, and how to apply the knowledge. The situational dimension is the actual practice of certain knowledge. This process is the realisation of people's perceptual thinking, which may involve the adaptation of the theoretical knowledge to fit with particular situations.

To conclude, this study grounded a substantive theory to understand the beginning Mandarin teacher's conceptions of CLT. The theory consists of three dimensions identified from the teacher's perspectives of CLT. The theory has provided one possible explanation to address the gap between theory and practice. Further studies in the field are needed as the sample of this study is relatively small. Meanwhile, the theory implies a general process of how people apply certain theoretical knowledge into practice. This implication requires cross-disciplinary research to develop the substantive theory into a formal theory that would be applicable in a wide range of social contexts.

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