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Cultural Resistance to Imported Pedagogy: The Case of Task-Based Language Teaching in English Class in China

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one way of translating some principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) into practice. It offers practical ways of establishing a balance in classroom instruction between developing 'knowing how' and 'knowing what', the latter of which is caused by the traditional English teaching 'presentation, practice and production (PPP) model popular in English classrooms in the People's Republic of China. However, TBLT has failed to make the biggest impact on English language teaching (ELT) as expected in Chinese context as an imported pedagogy. This paper investigates one of the most important potential constraints on the adaptation of TBLT in the English classroom, namely, the Chinese cultural of learning. It argues that TBLT and the Chinese cultural of learning are in conflict in several important aspects mainly including the following relationship: Input-oriented or output-oriented approach to language learning, teacher-centeredness or student-centeredness, language knowledge or language ability and so on. In view of such fundamental differences caused by the Chinese cultural of learning which puts great emphasis on the input of learning for students, this paper contends that it is sometimes counterproductive to adopt the pedagogy which originated and developed in a different sociocultural context. It concludes by arguing for the necessity of adopting a cautious approach to using the imported pedagogy in Chinese context and developing a sensible consciousness facing pedagogical choices in English teaching classrooms.

Key words: Cultural Resistance, Task-Based Language Teaching, English language teaching.

Introduction and Background

Around the past three decades, as an international language, English has become more and more important and it has enjoyed a superior prestige in China. Because of its importance, English language teaching (ELT) has received a great deal of attention. The traditional approach has long been the presentation, practice and production (PPP) model, which is featured by the introduction of grammatical rules, presentation of examples of correct sentence structures using the grammatical items in focus, and all kinds of grammar tests to assess students' learning results, simply because the examination systems in China put a premium on formal accuracy. Although this approach has took deep root in, and therefore, has drawn strong support from, the Chinese cultural of learning, students are still unhappy about the neglect of the application of grammar rules in real-life communication even they appreciate the strict adherence to grammatical form of correctness. 'Knowing what' and 'knowing how' are two equally important aspects of English language learning for Chinese students. Educators and governments in China are intensively addressing the need to increase the number of the people who can communicate effectively in English. To address this problem and to keep up with the latest development in language pedagogy, ELT in China has undergone both a top-down and button-up reform. An important part of the top-down reform has been an effort to import communicative language teaching (CLT) and implant it into the Chinese context. As part of the button-up reform of English language teaching, tremendous efforts and resources have been made on the changes and upgrading of teaching methods. Teachers and researchers in China are urgent to find some teaching methods which can bridge the gap between language knowledge and ability, form and meaning, individual work and cooperative study. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) appears to be a good option for the reason that "It treasures both the learning process and learning results, language forms and meaning, and linguistic competence and communicative function" (Zhang, 1999:46). Despite the great efforts on the exploration of new teaching methods, many Chinese teachers and learners of English do not seem to have experienced any fundamental changes concerning their understanding of effective ELT. Although TBLT has been an effective teaching method in the Western countries, it has not received widespread support in real teaching practice and the traditional PPP model and grammar-translation method are still dominant in most of the English classrooms in China, even TBLT has met resistances both from teachers and students. Researchers have been debating on the necessity, appropriateness and effectiveness of adopting TBLT in Chinese educational context. Researchers identified some possible constraints on the adoption of TBLT in the Chinese context (Wang, Q., 2006: 36). The first is that it may not be effective for presenting new language items and nor it be effective for those contexts where language exposure is not sufficient and class time is limited. The second constraint is class time and professional abilities of teachers. The third is about the difficulty level of tasks designed for classroom teaching. Lastly, the Chinese culture of learning may cause some difficulty for students to adapt to it.

This paper investigates the Chinese culture of learning as one of the constraints, arguably the most important one, on the adoption of TBLT that has a foreign origin in Chinese context. It argues that TBLT has not made the biggest impact as expected on ELT in China mainly because some of its underpinning theories and practices clash with the expectations of teaching and learning English in Chinese culture of learning.

Rationale and characteristics of TBLT

During 1950s an approach emerged in the United Kingdom based on behaviorist teaching practices known as PPP, which was soon popularized in the field of language teaching and employed by many professional schools throughout the world. Before the introduction of CLT and TBLT, the traditional approach to foreign language teaching in China has long been PPP, a form-focused approach which advocates three stages for teaching new language: Presentation, Practice and Production. Presentation often focuses on a single point of grammar usually presented explicitly in a context. This stage is assumed to develop an understanding of the grammar point. Presentation is followed by controlled practice which is assumed to enable learners to use and automatize the newly learned grammar point. The production stage is expected to offer an opportunity for learners to reproduce the target language more spontaneously and flexibly. The PPP model focuses on one or two forms specified by the teacher and the teacher controls the learning process. More importantly, the success of the production is judged in terms of whether or not learners produce the target forms as taught by the teacher. PPP is based on the assumption that students will learn what is taught in the same order in which it was taught, but Skehan (1996:18) argues that there is no evidence that this happens. Second language acquisition (SLA) research shows that the strategies and cognitive processes employed by learners are largely independent of the way learners are taught, so Shehadeh (2005:15) believes the rationale that teaching a particular grammar leads to learning no longer carries much credibility. Learners do not simply and necessarily acquire the language to which they are exposed to, especially under such a condition that they are very passive in the process of learning. Due to ignoring the communication as a main goal of language learning, PPP came under serious attacks and criticisms by various scholars from 1990s onwards (Maftoon, & Sarem, 2012). Under this condition, TBLT was introduced as a remedy for PPP in China. TBLT is not new. Prabhu used a task-based approach with secondary school classes in Bangalore, India, on his Communicational Teaching Project, beginning in 1979. In order to understand task-based language teaching, we must first specify as clearly as possible what we mean by 'task'. Different definitions and uses of the term 'task' exist throughout the literature, ranging from rather general to quite specific. Here is a definition of a pedagogical task: ...an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language. Task may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative...since it provides a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

(Richards, et al. 1986:289) Nunan (2004:13) offers a definition of TBLT as follows: The task-based approach aims at providing opportunities for learners to experiment with and explore both spoken and written language through learning activities that are designed to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Learners are encouraged to activate and use whatever language they already have in the process of completing a task. The use of task will also give a clear and purposeful context for the teaching and learning of grammar and other language features as well as skills. In TBLT classroom, the use of tasks is the central component in learning because they provide authentic contexts for promoting learners' acquisition. Richards and Rodgers (2001:228) suggest that this is because 'tasks are believed to foster process of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning. Nunan (2004:6) summarizes six characteristics of TBLT as follows: First, it is a needs-based approach to content selection; Secondly, it emphasizes on learning to communicate through interaction in the target; Thirdly, authentic texts are introduced into the learning situation; Fourthly, it provides opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself; Fifthly, it enhances the learner' own personal experience as important contribution elements to classroom learning; and lastly, there is a link of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

As 'a development within the communicative approach' (Littlewood, 2004: 324), TBLT has the following positive improvements compared with PPP teaching model carried out in China. First, authentic texts are introduced into the learning materials; in this way, learning becomes more real for learners. Secondly, learners are provided opportunities to engage in communicative activities and tasks. They have chances to communicate in the target language and negotiate meaning, so the focus is on process rather than on product and fluency is prior to other language skills. Thirdly, TBLT focuses mainly on meaning rather than on form, which conforms to the purpose of CLT, namely, the purpose of communication, so learning becomes more meaningful for learners. Fourthly, a great change takes place concerning learners' roles because learners will take an active role rather than a passive one in the language learning process. Therefore, based on these advantages, in mainland China, the National English Language Standard, published early in 2001, 'strongly advocates task-based teaching, the latest methodological realization of communicative pedagogy' (Hu, 2005a:15).

Chinese Culture of Learning

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) define 'culture of learning' as follows: "much behavior in [foreign] language classroom is set within take-for-granted frameworks of expectation, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching [and learning] relate to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996:169)

As a complex and broad concept that involves both culture and learning, culture of learning takes root deep in cultural tradition and the cultural tradition has surely a very strong influence on the formation of culture of learning. The Chinese culture of learning is deeply affected by Confucianism that spells out rules of behavior for each level of human interaction and exerts influence on education and learning, teaching and assessment preferences of Chinese learners. In the Confucian society in China that puts great emphasis on collectivism, the respect to the authority and collective behaviors are emphasized and learners are encouraged to achieve their learning goals through great efforts and concentration of the will power by themselves. Education is perceived as important both for personal improvement and social development. Chinese culture of learning puts greater emphasis on teachers' instruction. In teaching practice, teachers transmit important knowledge points to students and students grasp the knowledge points by doing a lot of practice or through memorization. Teachers are the authority in the classroom and there is usually a hierarchy between teachers and students. Students tend to be passive in the classroom learning. Good learning is believed to take place in the teaching environment that involves the following factors: varied teaching methods by the teachers and hard work by students under teachers' directions. Therefore, language learning in China is often described as input-oriented or teacher-centered (Yang, 2008). Chinese culture of learning is summarized as follows (Cheng, 2000):

1. The central aim of education is to distribute knowledge. Teaching and learning should guarantee knowing rather than know-how. That is why it is extremely difficult to translate the word "know-how" into Chinese.
2. Teachers have absolute authority in the classroom. Students show great respect to teachers, but they also expect the teachers to have thorough knowledge of the subjects they teach. In order to avoid being challenged by students, many teachers do not give students opportunities to ask questions.
3. Chinese is a non-roman alphabet language. The rote learning method is often used in the early stages of learning Chinese. Much of the learning relies on memory, imitation, repetition and recitation practices. This method continues to exist at later education stages.
4. The Chinese people have a long tradition of diligence. They trust working hard more than working in effective ways. Both students and teachers believe it is working hard that counts.
5. A strong centralized educational system has been operating for a long time in China. Schools are constantly under pressure from national curriculum and exam systems, which are usually knowledge-based.

6. Due to the Chinese modesty psychology, to remain reticent about one's strengths is a virtue. However, to remain quiet about one's ignorance can avoid losing face. Many Chinese students do not considering asking questions a good habit.

Potential cultural resistances to TBLT in China

English learners in China usually have dual goals of learning this language, namely, a practical realistic goal related to exams, and another goal related to using English for communication, and these learners may put different degrees of emphasis on these two goals. As an important subject in the teaching system from primary school to university, English plays an important role for students' schooling grading. It cannot be denied that most Chinese English learners study English for tests that mainly stress on accuracy of knowledge of English rather than communicative ability. Therefore, we can safely argue that most of them have a much stronger exam-related motivation than a communication-related motivation under the present exam-oriented educational system. Willis and Willis (2007) state that TBLT is not designed with exams in mind, and that it is designed to produce learners who can use their English outside the classroom, even if they make grammatical mistakes or errors. Needless to say, examination system decides teaching methods and that has become a very typical feature of Chinese culture of learning, namely, language knowledge is prior to language ability. China has the biggest population of school English learners as a foreign language in the world. Unlike second language learning, which usually takes place in the target language environment or where the target language co-exists with the native language, English learning in China is influenced by many factors, among which culture of learning is an important but rarely realized one by people. Cheng (2000) even argues that culture of learning seems to have a greater impact on the teaching and learning of English than on other subjects because in foreign language teaching, very often methodologies and materials are imported from outside. TBLT was imported into China from the West and proved to be an effective teaching method to some extent; it has inevitably encountered some cultural resistances in a completely new teaching environment concerning the following pairs of relationship.

Input-oriented or output-oriented approach to language learning?

Under the influence of Chinese culture of learning and the lack of authentic language environment, English language learners in China focus mainly on language knowledge by means of reading, doing exercises and teachers' instruction. Foreign language learning approach in China is basically input-oriented (Xia & Wu, 1999). The features of this input-oriented approach to learning are that teachers are the center of the classroom teaching and that English learning is centered on language knowledge. Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2011) holds that most second language acquisition (SLA) researchers acknowledge the importance of input in second language learning. Bill VanPatten (1996: 5) points out that all SLA models devote much attention to input and unanimously acknowledge that meaning-bearing input is essential to SLA.

Despite some of the potential problems with the neglect of the cultivation of language ability in the first place, the input-oriented approach to English learning is proved to be useful and effective in ELT in Chinese context in the following two aspects. First, it is very useful for students to grasp language knowledge, especially English grammar points accurately and as quickly as possible; secondly, it is efficient for the teachers to organize and conduct the teaching in classes that are often very big. Therefore, the input-oriented approach to English learning is still very popular in China now. Compared with the Chinese input-oriented approach to language learning, Western language culture of learning is regarded as an output-oriented one (Wang, M. S., 2006). TBLT, as ‘extensions of the CLT movement from the Western countries’ (Richards, 2005:29), features learning by doing and doing by using language. It focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking learners to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Assessment is mainly based on task output rather than on accuracy of the prescribed language forms, which makes TBLT especially popular for developing target language fluency and learners’ confidence. TBLT is regarded as a learner-centered and output-oriented approach to learning. The problem of TBLT is that the task-based approach to instruction is currently in a transitional position (Skehan, 1996). Theoretically, “task-based teaching has not yet fully established itself” (Careless, 2002: 390). Two main practical problems concerning TBLT are the choice and designing of task itself and the difficulty level of tasks. Facing English learners with different levels of English proficiency, teachers are in a dilemma situation to design and choose tasks with different levels of difficulty. What’s more, the effectiveness of TBLT, especially in teaching grammar, can be a question because it may not be effective in teaching pre-specified target grammar structure. So it can be safely concluded that whether it is useful and practical or not for learners to learn a foreign language through an imported pedagogy situated in the Chinese culture of learning can be quite suspicious.

Teacher-centeredness or student-centeredness?

The role played by teachers and students in the classroom is an eternal topic for discussion and exploration in educational research. There exists a very big difference in the culture of learning concerning the roles of teachers and students between China and the West. Student-centered education, as known as learner-centered education, shifts the focus of teaching from the teacher to the student. Learner-centered teaching places the emphasis on the person who is doing the learning (Weimer, 2002). There are two key components in the learner-centered classroom. First, more responsibility is placed on students to manage their own learning and secondly, teachers take roles as facilitators of knowledge to help learners learn how to learn rather than being the source of knowledge as was traditionally the case. Teachers help to promote learner autonomy by creating and maintaining a learning environment through communicative tasks. TBLT, as a learner-centered approach to learning, seems to be a very good pedagogical option for learners to do so. However, three very realistic problems exist in Chinese English classes. The first is that

not all English learners will be able to make their own choices about their learning process and secondly, the class size is usually very big in which TBLT is not easy to conduct. Thirdly, there is no authentic language environment for English learners because English is a foreign language in China. TBLT puts learners at the center of learning and teaching and a very high professional requirement on teachers. Under these conditions, it is against expectations for Chinese teachers and students to accept any pedagogical practice that tends to put teachers on a par with their students and detracts from teacher authority by losing face probably caused by the failure to motivate their students in the process of teaching by using TBLT. In this context, many English teachers in China find TBLT a little bit threatened because it requires a higher level of proficiency and a strong communicative and sociolinguistic competence of English language which they may lack. Language classroom in China is basically a teacher-centered one. Teacher-centered learning situates the teacher as the primarily "active" role while students take a more "passive" and receptive role. In a teacher-centered classroom, teachers choose and decide what the students will learn, how the students will learn and how the students will be assessed on their learning. The traditional Chinese model of teaching is one of an 'empty-vessel' or a 'pint pot' (Maley, 1982). Such a model is characterized by the transmission of knowledge principally through an imitative and repetitive process (Paine, 1992; Tang & Absalom, 1998). The truth is that the traditional teaching approaches create conditions where teachers feel secure as they can predict the language that will be needed and they feel comfortable in their roles of knowers. So Skehan (1998:94) states that, for example, "It is comforting and places the teacher firmly in the proceedings. It also lends itself to accountability, since it generates clear tangible goals, precise syllabuses, and a comfortably itemizable basis for the evaluation of effectiveness". It is a common belief that a teacher must assume a directive role, having the sole prerogative in deciding what to teach and exerting complete control over the class all the time (Tang & Absalom, 1998). In this way, class teaching can be fully predictable and a smooth delivery of the planned teaching contents can be guaranteed, which can offer a sense of security to both teachers and students. Therefore, English teachers still insist on the traditional teaching approaches to English teaching despite the relative failure to produce effective language users.

Effort or achievement?

Effort and achievement are viewed differently in Chinese culture: for Chinese students, effort is more important than ability, and achievement through disciplined effort far more valued than achievement through ability alone (Salili, 1996). Effort and learning strategies are taken as controlled factors and Chinese learners are more likely to attribute their learning results to hard work than to the uncontrolled characteristic of ability. In the Chinese culture of learning, a focus on collective goals and achievement through disciplined effort is more important, while in the western educational values which are based on Socratic philosophy, a more student-centered and participative approach is valued. Another feature of the Chinese culture of learning is that the product, not the process of learning is more preferred. Chinese students appear mainly concerned with the mastery of correct information through memorization under the great influence of

Confucianism. Confucianism is defined by ‘strong traditional elements of the student’s own effort, the need for reflective thinking and independent interpretation, for internalization of understanding and putting what is learnt into practice’ (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 12). In the Chinese culture of learning, the emphasis is put on the development of a skill first before the exploration and creativity using the skill, which comes later (Biggs, 1996: 55) concerning the valuing of the product over the process. In other words, form comes before meaning in English language learning in China. As an imported pedagogy, TBLT considers the personal attributes of the teacher, good teacher-student communication and a low-anxiety classroom environment as most conducive for happening of good learning. In TBLT classroom, learning usually takes place in the form of cooperative learning; what is more important is that the development of students’ ability of using language is prior to language knowledge. The main form to testify TBLT achievement is that students can use English in communication to solve a certain problem after learning in the class. But Chinese and English are two quite different languages, so Chinese learners of English want to pursue a good mastery of language structure first facing this foreign language before they can use English for communication in daily life. That is to say, Chinese learners of English will put more emphasis on the efforts to improve the mastery of their English language structure, not on the cultivation of language ability in the process of learning, which is especially true for the young learners of English in China. Their sense of achievement of English learning is mainly to pass a certain test, not to improve language ability itself. TBLT fails to meet the expectations of many Chinese learners of English in this context.

Conclusion

English learners in China will always frame their learning ‘within a Chinese culture of learning’ (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 8). In other words, they have expectations and beliefs about the teaching and learning of English from a Chinese perspective. Much research has questioned whether the communicative approach is appropriate in countries with ‘culture of learning’ (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) different from Western educational settings where the approach was developed. The Chinese culture of learning is described as a teacher-centered one in which ‘education is conceived more as a process of knowledge accumulation than as a process of knowledge for immediate purposes, and the preferred model of teaching is a mimetic or epistemic one that emphasizes knowledge transmission’ (Hu, 2005b:653). It is especially true for the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language in China. This is in conflict with the learner-centered pedagogy advocated by TBLT that was introduced from the West concerning roles of teachers and students in the class, priority of language form and ability, and process and product of English language teaching and learning in a cultural sense in Chinese educational context.

The cultural resistances to TBLT do not mean that TBLT is not without its advantages in Chinese educational setting. The traditional Chinese ELT classroom is featured by lack of interaction, individualization, creativity and self-expression. As an innovation in pedagogical development, TBLT provides very useful and practical ways to solve these problems. What is

more important is that it has upgraded Chinese teachers and learners' understandings of theory and practice of foreign language education. What the Chinese teachers and learners should be aware is that they should understand more about this imported pedagogical innovation and try to make good use of it in Chinese educational setting. After all, TBLT can be effective only when teachers and students of English are willing to accept and implement it with good faith and whether it is accepted or not is determined largely by the Chinese culture of learning in which the teachers and students have been socialized into. Now it is widely accepted that no single method or pedagogy will fit all teachers and learners in all contexts. Chinese teachers and students can draw on the ideas and experiences of others, including those from abroad, but can not simply adopt them as ready-made recipes. They should believe their own voice and develop a pedagogy that is suitable to their own educational and cultural conditions.

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