An Egg-Cooking Approach to Communicative Language Teaching

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I teach in a TESL department which provides courses for trainees to become secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong. The BA program we offer lasts for three years. Within these three years, trainees take courses in three strands: English proficiency and communication, English language and socio-cultural studies, and theories and practices of teaching and learning English as a second language. In fall 2001, three tutors and I were responsible for the final year Practice Teaching course. The course requires trainees to have eight weeks of lecture, discussion, and microteaching before they are placed in local secondary schools, teaching junior form English (grades 7-9) for five weeks. During these weeks, the trainees are responsible for one English class (40 students) and take up other duties assigned to them by the school, for example, invigilation, class substitution, and so on. In short, these trainees work like licensed teachers, only they are given few contact hours.

Before trainees take the Practice Teaching course, they have taken five other courses which familiarize them with a classroom setting, routine, and language; these courses provide notions of communicative language teaching (CLT). The Practice Teaching course requires students to design class activities with the textbooks prescribed by the individual school, and direct students to complete an integrated language project; trainees also have to write teaching journals and collect data for assignments of other courses. Before trainees start their Practice Teaching, they must submit their detailed lesson plan for all five weeks of teaching. They are advised to prepare thoroughly, but must also be flexible for changes when their students respond to their plan differently. Each lesson plan includes: stage, time needed, objectives, material, procedure, classroom language, students' activity, discourse format, and problem anticipated. Some of these lessons should include CLT elements.

I supervised nine trainees. When I read their lesson plans, I saw that trainees had awkwardly invented grammar games when teaching language structure; they had their students do jigsaw reading whenever there was a reading lesson; and they had students sit together for a meaningless task. Such tasks appeared almost every other day in their lesson plans and could not work, even on paper, for a class of 40 young minds. It dawned on me that trainees thought that group work (because of its dialogic process and

nature) meant communicative language teaching; in order to please me, trainees designed group work for their students. Trainees considered it the only "workable" method in teaching a foreign language. This paper attempts to clarify some misunderstanding seen in my students' lesson plans and microteaching. It also provides two lessons given by my trainees after the clarification.

CLT in a Nutshell

A lot of CLT definitions, characteristics, and case studies have been presented since 1970s. Wilkins (1972) believes that people should learn a second language for performing different functions in life. Larsen-Freeman (1986) complements this idea by adding that all tasks should be done with a communicative intent. Because of these two notions, it is natural to introduce authentic learning materials in class (Nunan, 1991; Dubin, 1995; Widdowson, 1996). CLT also is associated with learner-centered and experienced-based tasks (Richard and Rodgers, 1986; Lo, Tsang, and Wong, 2000), and therefore favors interaction among small numbers of students in order to maximize time for student activities in "negotiate meaning" (Li, 1998, p. 679). But all these characteristics come under the "weak version" of CLT, according to Holliday (1994). In addition to agreeing that CLT's focus is not on language practice but on learning about how language works in discourse, the lesson should focus on the way students communicate with the learning material. Therefore, students completing a task is fore-grounded, and communicating with teach other is back-grounded. In this spirit, teachers do not have to monitor group work closely; classes can actually be conducted as a whole, as long as students are communicating with rich texts and producing useful hypotheses about the language.

Weak and Strong Versions of CLT

The weak version of CLT still dominates in many Asian countries simply because teachers mistake group work and role-play as the sole ideas of CLT (Thompson, 1996). Another reason is the textbooks prescribed for language classes. In Hong Kong, for example, secondary school students in Forms 1 to 5 (grades 7-11) have set books for their English lessons; students meet with the English teacher for about five hours every week, using different textbooks. These books include an all-in-one comprehension book and its accompanying workbook. The book usually has ten chapters to be used in one school year; each chapter includes several weak CLT mini-tasks of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as explicit mechanical exercises for grammar teaching. If teachers go through each task carefully, they will need at least three weeks for one chapter. Therefore, teachers choose the more essential tasks or those easy-to-complete for class lectures. In addition to the all-in-

one textbook, students have a separate listening book, and one or two storybooks; the book list sometimes continues with a grammar book. On top of that, teachers assign and mark composition assignments every two to three weeks. With all these, it is no wonder teachers choose an easy way out by just skipping over some tasks in the textbooks and giving up on designing authentic meaningful tasks for their students.

One of the tasks in *Oxford Junior English* (the most popular English textbook among Hong Kong secondary schools) set for Form 2 students (age 14), requires students to read a short dialogue (six turns) between a Chinese woman and a Chinese supermarket manager. The woman had bought some pre-wrapped vegetables and found that they had gone bad. She returned to the supermarket to complain about it and ask for an exchange. The manager requested the receipt, made the exchange accordingly, and apologized. The task required students to simulate the situation and construct two other dialogues on their own; cue words were given. True, this kind of situation will happen in real life, but how often do Form 2 Hong Kong students shop on their own and upon finding bad merchandize, return to complain about it in English?! Even if students had the problem they probably would ask their parents to do the complaining and certainly not in English. When students see the pictures provided and read the dialogue, all authenticity has disappeared. Likewise, teaching junior students to order a Happy Meal in English in their home country is irrelevant, unless teachers can provide a context where English must be used.

Therefore, in order to have a genuine use of English, an authentic situation must be created for the students. For example, when teaching complaints and clarifying discrepancies, the teacher can introduce a marked English test paper with the total score calculated incorrectly. This will create a situation for the student to approach the English-speaking teacher and ask the teacher to correct the discrepancy. Likewise, reporting loss of personal items, inviting other teachers to a class function, discussing the venue for an outing are all excellent CLT opportunities. The Happy Meal issue can also be addressed: some students may have an English-speaking domestic helper at home; students can describe in greater detail to the helper what kind of fast food the helper can have over the counter. In an IT language class, students can even communicate with each other on ICQ Net Meeting, a channel for users to chat and type instantaneously and simultaneously. Teachers can also collaborate with schools in other countries in the same time zone, so that students in two countries can have interactions on a simple task.

Different Egg Dishes

Although there are definitions and my trainees seemed to have ample input before they taught, they still had a vague idea of what CLT is. To help them understand better, I drew upon the cookbook theory. I told my trainees that CLT is very much like

cooking: they have to show the ingredients and the steps very clearly; sometimes they may also have to state the nutritious value. I asked trainees to think of the ways they wanted their eggs to be cooked (hard-boiled, sunny side up, over easy, omelets, etc). I chose eggs because I was sure all trainees knew one or two ways to cook them. I also supplied the dishes of Cantonese steamed eggs, Shanghai-style fried egg white, and egg-and-milk dessert. I asked trainees to discuss in detail among themselves how their eggs were cooked. A few minutes later, reports were given.

After the reports, I asked students to find the similarities among their cooking methods: they all involved breaking the shell of the eggs, lighting the fire, cooking, and eating. Here is how I drew parallels between cooking and CLT: no matter how one cooks the eggs, there is no getting around some of the essential steps; likewise, the actual reading. listening, speaking, and writing must appear in a CLT activity, no matter how well it is masqueraded. It is important for students to actually eat the eggs (digesting the item taught) rather than just picking the ham out of the omelet (sitting together and playing a game without a focused point or a learning objective). I also told trainees that even if they followed the same procedures to boil and egg, they would get different results every time: the room temperature, the flame, the amount of water in the saucepan, and the while-yolk-ratio would affect the firmness of the egg when it was done. Therefore, trainees should focus on the subject matter, be responsive to the outcome, and have their students complete the task, rather than on the language while delivering a lesson. If a communicative lesson does not work well, a small alteration may produce very different results. It was also pointed out to students that although each egg dish may be tasty, wrong ingredients put together may be disastrous. Therefore, students should consider carefully steps and material in order to prevent having awkward and irrelevant CLT tasks in the lesson. In short, a CLT lesson should be focused, meaningful, and fun.

The Goldfish Lesson

A trainee seemed to capture the "egg" idea and had a consultation with me for his upcoming listening microteaching lesson. He wanted to carry out a 30-minute listening activity; the content was about goldfish. The lesson would be in four stages: realia discussion, vocabulary teaching, game, and recapitulation. In the lesson, other classmates would act as junior level secondary school students. In his microteaching, he brought along two goldfish to stir students' interest and discussed the joy and difficulty of keeping pet fish at home; students happily provided some comments. He also stuck nine A4 size pictures of different kinds of goldfish on the board, using them to teach the colors, shapes, and body parts (e.g., orange, golden, silver, oval, round, dragon's eye, red cap, fin, etc.). When he was sure that his students had digested the

input, he told them to open the book to the listening task. The task involved two people describing different features of four goldfish (already on the board). He divided the students into groups and each group would send one representative for the game. He wanted his students to listen to the tape and when they recognized the fish described, they should rush to the board and write the team name there. Although the game looked simple, these university students enjoyed it. Marks were calculated. Then the trainee asked some students to describe the other five unmarked fish to each other. When the 30-minute lesson was over, class comments were given.

The classmates were glad to see how the class had been conducted. They commented that they did not think the task was on listening when the goldfish were brought in and colors, shapes and all were taught. They thought it was a lesson teaching them how to distinguish different types of fish. Even when the tape was played, they considered it a game; it was when the game was over that the class realized the whole lesson was a listening task in disguise. The class recapped the idea of CLT in the lesson above: They learnt the necessary vocabulary words in a meaningful way, they participated in an opinion sharing session when they talked about the joy and difficulty of keeping fish, they competed in a game. They also realized the actual act of listening and writing down the answer. The class also liked the wrapping up activity task where students were asked to describe the other five unmarked fish, using the vocabulary learnt; such an exercise enhanced students' knowledge.

A Game Prepared by Students

Another trainee delivered her "comparative and superlative" lesson. After fifteen minutes of introducing the idea, the structure, and the form of adjective comparison, she put students in groups of three. Each student was then given eight pieces of small paper. Student A in each group wrote eight different *names* on all his papers, student B wrote *adjectives*, and student C wrote *venues*. Then all pieces were mixed and turned upside down. Students arranged the 24 pieces of paper on their desk in 4 rows of 6. Each student took turns in turning over three pieces; when the three pieces consisted of a name, an adjective, and a venue, all three students had to race and write a complete sentence in either the comparative or superlative form. If the three pieces did not represent the three categories, they would have to be turned face down again. The game continued until all papers were turned.

Although the first 15 minutes were dry and mechanical, it was informational and needed; the rest of the class was highly communicative. This 30-minute lesson was a success because it involved four different CLT activities in one game. The trainee instructed the students to make their own game, and then she gave instructions for the

game, both highly communicative according to Holliday (1994). The game was based on competing to make sentences, which required students to memorize the positions of the words; stop. At last, students in the same group checked the sentences and the winner would come forward. Readers can easily recognize that this task was a game-masqueraded grammar exercise and a lot more effective than mechanical drilling. The real situation here is students wanted to win the game and the game had to be played in English. The notions of being focused, meaningful and fun were a foundation in this game. It was easy to monitor, and little preparation was needed from the teacher who only had to make sure that clear instructions were given.

Conclusion

Teacher education around the world has put emphasis on more use of CLT with more interest in student-centeredness, but to save trouble, new teachers or experienced teachers who have more than one English class may choose to follow the layout and suggestion of textbooks only. Teachers who have grown up in cultures with teacher-centered classrooms, examination and curriculum constraints, and large classes are more tempted to use the weak version of CLT or to give up CLT altogether (Miller and Aldred, 2000). It is ideal to apply CLT throughout an English course, but if a school is confined to using uncreative textbooks, teachers should consider conducting a CLT activity at the proper times to enrich the class. This paper does not attempt to overlook the necessity of role-play or direct teaching methods (for example, teaching grammar) in an English lesson. It simply describes how weak versions of CLT tasks can easily be changed into stronger ones. Examples are provided for using the same text or discussion point, showing that a change of scenarios can bring out the authenticity of the language activity. This paper, however, reemphasizes that CLT has to be focused, meaningful, and fun. It also stresses that such activities need not be group work but should focus on task completion rather than on learning the form intently. In short, teachers should understand that whether a dish is tasty and nutritious or not depends on a lot of variables, but if the cook decides at the beginning already that wrong ingredients will be used in the dish, the dish will be guaranteed a failure. Teachers should remember that their students should be able to appreciate and use the learned items soon after they have been taught, rather than wait until students become old enough to file a complaint or shop in an English-speaking country on their own.

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