Technology and Innovation in China's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classrooms

ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore issues around technology and innovation in China's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. In this chapter, the authors (a) discuss China's English language curriculum, (b) demonstrate the issues Chinese EFL teachers face with task-based language instruction, (c) explore how technology is currently used in EFL classrooms and (e) examine how technology and innovative teaching methods can assist Chinese EFL teachers with integrating a communicative language approach in their classrooms. This chapter will also provide a case study of how one Chinese EFL teacher used technology to innovate EFL instruction.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Task-based Language Teaching, Digital Learning, Communication, English Language Learning, Curriculum, Teaching, Instruction

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of technology has created unprecedented opportunities for innovation in classrooms. Tools such as Skype, WhatsApp, and WeChat help teachers and students communicate across borders, and even allow for cross-cultural collaboration and inquiry projects (e.g. Spires, Himes, & Lyjak, 2016). Such communication can be a great asset to foreign language classrooms, where target language use is vital in developing proficiency. Nevertheless, target language use is often lacking in China's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where students are not in an immersive environment. To encourage target language use and build students' communication skills, teachers are encouraged to use task-based learning approaches in which students are assigned real-world tasks to accomplish target language use, such as ordering food in a restaurant or planning a trip with a travel agent (Ministry of Education, 2011). Such teaching is often student-centered, which can be uncomfortable for Chinese teachers, who often feel more comfortable with traditional methods of language learning (Yu, 2001; Hu, 2002). Given the importance of learning English in China and the affordances and innovations of

technology, the authors of this paper desired to explore how technology can assist Chinese teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in implementing a communicative, task-based language learning approach in their classrooms.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this chapter is to (a) discuss China's English language curriculum, (b) demonstrate the issues Chinese EFL teachers face with task-based language instruction, (c) explore how technology is currently used in EFL classrooms and (d) examine how technology and innovative teaching methods can assist Chinese EFL teachers with integrating a communicative language approach in their classrooms. This chapter will also provide a case study of how the second author used technology to innovate EFL instruction.

China's New English Language Curriculum

China's English language curriculum has been evolving since 1949, reflecting the socio-political changes in China (Wang & Lam, 2009). As China became more internationally oriented, in part by joining the Word Trade Organization and hosting the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the country became more open to foreign learning, and more specifically, English language learning (Lam, 2002). This was first reflected in the English language curriculum of 1993 (Wang & Lam, 2009; Ministry of Education, 1993) and even more robustly stated in the curriculum released in 2003:

> *Language is the most important tool for thinking, communication, and social activities. It plays a significant role in in the all-around development of human beings. Through English language learning, students can develop their intelligence, affect, attitudes, and values and shape their character.* (Translated by Wang & Lam, 2009 from Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 1-2).

This new English language curriculum was also designed to help students develop English language skills that would allow them to communicate internationally (Li & Baldauf, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2003). This curriculum requires that students begin learning English at age 8, and recommends that students engage in English language learning four times a week for a minimum of 80 minutes

(Anayaegbu, Ting, & Li, 2012). The focus of the curriculum is on the improvement of students' communication skills, as opposed to the traditional methods of rote learning of vocabulary and grammar (Wang, 2007; Wang & Lam, 2010). Additionally, the new curriculum emphasizes task-based teaching methods to develop communicative competence—knowledge of not just vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, but also sociolinguistic behaviors and dialogic patterns of the target language (Canale & Swain, 1980). This contrasts markedly with the past goal of simply scoring high on an examination.

Essentially, China's new English language curriculum encouraged a popular language methodology called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which focuses on communication skills over traditional knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Since the early 1990s, CLT has been a popular foreign language methodology for researchers, linguists, and teachers around the world (Liu, 2015; Rao & Lei, 2014). Although aspects of CLT are debated (Woods & Cakir, 2011; Najjari, 2014; Littlewood, 2014), many acknowledge that the overall goal of CLT is to teach language learners to communicate meaning with other speakers (Savignon, 2007).

One approach to CLT is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT; Scrivener, 2011). This type of instruction engages learners in language use while they accomplish tasks (Kelch, 2011). Often, these are real-world tasks, and might involve such activities as asking for directions, buying a plane ticket in an airport, or ordering at a restaurant. Role-playing is also often used to set up these real-world scenarios in a classroom. For example, one student might act as a waiter at a restaurant while another is the customer. The task might be that the waiter 1) greets the customer and 2) asks for the customer's order, and then the second student, who plays the customer 1) places the order and 2) asks where the bathroom is located. As Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) indicate, TBLT aligns with classroom practice in three ways: it is learner-centered (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2001); it supports meaningful, contextualized learning activities rather than decontextualized grammar instruction (Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004); and it is comprised of specific components, e.g. the procedure of the activity, the task-oriented goal of the activity, and the specific learning outcome of the activity (Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998).

There is no consensus on exactly how to approach TBLT, or even on the definition of what a "task" is (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011). In general, however, "a classroom task is an activity having a particular goal and it contains communicative language in the process" (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011, p. 48). Three main approaches to TBLT have been identified: Long's (1985), Skehan's (1998), and Ellis' (2003). Though these differ in a few ways, they all emphasize that tasks should provide a context for natural language use (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011).

When one examines China's English language curriculum, the connections to TBLT can be seen. Zheng and Borg (2014) provide translations of guidelines for developing tasks provided in the curriculum:

- *Activities must have clear and achievable aims and objectives.*

- *Activities must be relevant to students' life experiences and interests; the content and style should be as true to life as possible.*

- *Activities must benefit the development of students' language knowledge, language skills and ability to use language for real communication.*

- *Activities should be of a cross-curricular nature, promoting the integrated development of students' thinking and imagination, aesthetic and artistic sense, cooperative and creative spirit.*

- *Activities should make students gather, process and use information, using English to communicate with others in order to develop their ability to use English to solve real problems.*

- *Activities should not purely be limited to the classroom but also extend to out of school learning.* (Zheng & Borg, 2014, p. 206)

However, as Zheng and Borg (2014) indicate, the curriculum does not specify exactly what a "task" might be, and there are no examples for teachers to follow. Although teachers did receive in-service training provided by the Chinese MOE, examples were not seen as practical and may not have thoroughly

explored or demonstrated all aspects of TBLT (Li & Baldauf, 2011; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Furthermore, as Zheng and Borg (2014) indicate, it be difficult for teachers to instruct students in different ways than those in which the teacher was originally taught. Such issues as this will be further explored in the next section.

Challenges to CLT and TBLT in Chinese EFL Classrooms

Despite China's new English language curriculum, teachers still have difficulty teaching English in a communicative way (Rao & Chunhua, 2014). There are several barriers that these teachers face. For example, class sizes in China usually range from 40 to 50 students, which makes providing an interactive, communicative environment difficult. Teachers often feel they will be unable to supervise all students on a task-based activity. Other issues were identified by Li and Baldauf (2011), who indicated that teachers' limited English proficiency, as well as proficiency with the concept of CLT has hindered this type of instruction in China. They also noted that teachers often feel they do not have enough resources or instructional time to enact such a teaching approach (e.g., Hu, 2002; Li, 1998; Nunan, 2003; Tran & Bauldauf, 2007; Yu 2001).

Several studies have researched Chinese EFL teachers' experiences with implementing the new curriculum's demands in the classroom. One study (Yan, 2012) found that although teachers viewed the new curriculum positively, they were unable to implement it due to a lack of support from administrators, resistance from students, and the continued importance placed on exams. According to Yan (2012), teachers in China are often concerned that if they attempt to implement the new curriculum, parents and students may complain that the teacher is not preparing students for their exam.

Another study performed by Zheng and Borg (2014) examined secondary teachers' beliefs and practices of task-based language learning. After interviewing EFL teachers, they found that the common consensus was that TBLT allowed students to practice communicating to one another and involved collaboration and group-work. Again, class size is an issue here. Furthermore, as Zheng and Borg (2014) noted, Chinese EFL teachers still need a better understanding of exactly what task-based learning entails.

Li and Baldauf (2011) found various other issues to be a constraint on Chinese EFL teachers. In this study, teachers noted that the new textbooks that had been released after the curriculum was introduced were too difficult. Teachers complained of too many vocabulary words and inconsistent explanations of grammar. They also remarked that they were too busy explaining the many new words and grammar that there was no time for the students to actually communicate. Many teachers also discussed the ineffective in-service teacher training they had received, and the lack of proficiency of some teachers. Lastly, teachers indicated that while the curriculum had changed, the exam-oriented educational system had not, still leaving them forced to teach to a test—a test which did not assess the communicative competence their curriculum standards promote.

This is a very big issue in China's EFL classrooms. Teachers feel constrained and unable to teach the way the new curriculum demands. However, the lack of task-based, communicative language teaching hinders students' ability to develop language skills that would be useful for more than examinations. As Qingquan, Chatupote, and Teo (2008) note,

> *In view of the lack of communication in English in the Chinese context, an environment where students can have more opportunities to use English…should be provided. This environment should consist of English corners, English clubs where many English activities are often organized, and English self-access centers where English websites, TV and radio programs, songs, games, books, magazines, newspapers and so forth are available, and pen-pal relationships among students between universities" (p. 355).*

As aforementioned, despite the new curriculum standards, the exams have not changed. Teachers typically do not feel comfortable deviating from a curriculum that is designed to prepare students for a test. Furthermore, parents and the students themselves do not want classes that do not necessarily aid in test preparation. All stakeholders are still focused on passing the exam, whereas the New Chinese English Language Curriculum focuses on communication. There seems to be a disconnect between the curriculum standards' desired outcomes—communicative competence— and the actual outcome—a high score on an exam.

The Use of Technology in Fostering CLT and Task-Based Instruction

Although there is no easy way to integrate these suggestions or incorporate such a massive systemic and pedagogical change as would be needed, there are technology tools that teachers can use to help transition their classrooms and begin incorporating CLT into their lessons while still sticking to test preparation. Furthermore, according to Chen (2013), when EFL classes incorporate technology and social experiences (e.g. cooperative and collaborative learning), students can be more motivated to learn the foreign language. Several methods that have been discussed and researched in previously published literature will be discussed below. Some of the research was conducted in other countries, but the authors believe the methods used could be applied to Chinese EFL classrooms.

1. Target Language Videos

One way technology can be incorporated in the curriculum to promote CLT and TBLT is through videos from the target country (Alm, 2008). Tschirner (2001) notes that videos expose learners to the "phonological, grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, and sociocultural features within a situational framework" (p. 307) while helping them to "plunge into and participate in the world of native speakers" (p. 318). One example of videos being used in a foreign language classroom is presented by Alm (2008). This study used an online website to access authentic German videos to allow her students to hear natives speak the target language, as well as connect to the foreign culture. Alm (2008) conducted a project with his students using a German soap opera. The students had various activities that they accomplished while watching the show with explicit learning goals. In particular, they were to pay attention to idiomatic speech and colloquialisms. The students also discussed the show on a class blog, describing their favorite characters and giving plot summaries. As part of a final project, students produced their own soap operas. They collaboratively wrote the script on Wikispaces (https://www.wikispaces.com/) and then worked to record and edit their films with iMovie.

Though this study was conducted in a German language classroom, it could be replicated in a Chinese EFL classroom. There are websites available in China that allow users to watch U.S. television and

movies in English, such as Sohu TV (http://tv.sohu.com/). Similarly, PPTV is an app available for Apple and Android products that also gives access to other U.S. television shows and movies. Wikispaces is also available in China, which would allow for the collaborative writing environment used in Alm's (2008) study.

Incorporating videos as Alm (2008) did in the Chinese EFL classroom could help expose students to natively spoken English as well as U.S. culture. This will help build communicative competence and help students learn the sociolinguistic norms of English speakers. Furthermore, by creating their own version of a television show, students will be collaborating and communicating in the foreign language. In doing so, they will be speaking, reading, writing, and listening in English. This would create promote CLT in the classroom. Furthermore, this activity would incorporate TBLT, as students must work together to complete the task of creating their own English television show.

2. Online Learning Communities

Another way to use technology to incorporate CLT in the Chinese EFL classroom is through online learning communities. These types of communities allow people with similar interests to connect and learn together despite geographical differences (Dieleman & Duncan, 2013; Groth & Bergner, 2007; Sun, Franklin, & Gao, 2015). There are many of these communities, and among them are a variety of shared interests. Some focus on past-times, like music, while others focus on work-related skills (Sun et al., 2015).

Sun et al. (2015) researched students using the Jituo online learning community. This community is designed for people seeking to study further their education abroad. Within this online learning community are specific forums geared towards specific topics. For example, there is a GRE Analytical Writing Discussion Forum designed for those who desire to improve their English writing skills and/or plan to take the GRE (Sun et al., 2015). Sun et al. (2015) examined this forum and determined that users perceive it as having a high level of teaching, cognitive, and social presence. As they note, this type of learning environment makes use of collaborative learning as well as the distributed expertise of learners.

Chinese EFL teachers should attempt to locate online learning communities such as this for their

students. Not only could these online learning communities help students prepare for their exams, but they could also provide students with a CLT learning environment. Chinese EFL teachers could also consider creating one of these learning communities through an online platform such as Wikispaces (discussed previously), for their classroom or even their entire school. Though an activity such as this may not help with speaking and listening, it can provide great support for students' writing and reading in English.

3. Online Games and Apps

In addition to online learning communities, the Internet offers vast amounts of games, tools, and apps that can aid in English-language learning. These online tools can promote learning engagement and motivation while they provide a fun environment for learning to occur. These tools can also be considered TBLT, as they typically offer tasks for student to complete using the target language.

On example of a serious game is Mingoville (http://www.mingoville.com/). This program, designed for children between 5 and 15 years old, engages learners through colors, animations, music, and movies (Anayaegbu, Ting, & Li, 2012). Anyaegbu, et al. (2012) conducted a study using Mingoville in a Chinese EFL primary school classroom. They found that students were more motivated and interested in learning English, and that students preferred learning English through the use of computer games.

 Given this finding, Chinese EFL teachers may want to consider using games and apps to support English language learning. Though teachers may not be likely to use digital tools if they are not part of the curriculum (Anyaegbu et al., 2012), teachers can encourage students to play these games outside of school to further their English language abilities. Other games and apps teachers may want to consider using are Duolingo, Mindsnacks, and Memrise. These all offer language learning in a fun, interactive environment.

4. Cell Phones and SmartPhones

A different way Chinese EFL teachers could incorporate CLT is through students' cell phones. Hayati, Jalilifar, and Mashhadi (2013) found that using short message service (SMS text messages) to

teach students English idioms was more effective than students' self-study of a pamphlet or students' contextual learning of idioms. Although this learning did not take place in a classroom and was not task-based, Hayati et al. (2013) concluded the effectiveness of SMS-based learning to be based on the push aspect—that the phone notifies the user of a message as soon as it is received. The push aspect encourages regular study, as a student will most likely check the message as soon as they receive it. This offers a flexible and more personalized approach to language learning and allows students to learn wherever they are (Hayati, et al. 2013). Furthermore, it can increase student engagement (Thomas, 2005, p. 5).

Chinese EFL teachers should consider using cell phones as part of their curriculum, even if they do not use it in class. Not only can students use their phones to play some of the apps and games discussed above, but teachers can also use messaging services to engage their students in the target language. Furthermore, teachers can use apps such as WeChat to allow their students to speak and text with speakers of the target language, even if they live in a different country. This will be discussed further below with an example.

Using Inquiry Learning to Incorporate CLT and TBLT

CLT and TBLT can also be incorporated into the curriculum through inquiry learning. This type of learning allows students to pose questions they are curious about and then work to find the answers to these questions. Often, project-based learning is used as an approach to inquiry (Boss & Krauss, 2007; Larmer, Ross, & Mergendoller, 2009).

One specific type of inquiry learning, known as Project-Based Inquiry (PBI; Spires, Himes, & Lyjak, 2016) has been conducted globally with a connection between schools in China and in the U.S. These projects have allowed Chinese students to study English alongside native speakers, as well as learn more about American culture. Using WeChat, students were placed in groups, with each group having roughly equal amounts of U.S. and Chinese students. Students had to work together to complete the PBI model (Spires, Kerkhoff, & Graham, 2015). Together, groups chose a compelling question, then worked to gather and analyze sources to find information to answer their question. Students worked together to

evaluate these sources and revise their claims until they created a final product, which they then shared to the public at a showcase held in the U.S. Students in China were able to attend virtually. Throughout this project, the Chinese students were able to practice their English with native speakers while working to learn content material alongside U.S. students who were roughly their age. Through technology and inquiry, these students were able to connect with native English-speaking students, learn about their culture, and engage in deeper learning of content.

Though projects such as these require partnerships between schools, which may not be possible for all EFL classrooms to achieve, inquiry can also be used within a single classroom. However, its use in EFL classrooms is currently underexplored in the research (Aguilar, 2016). This would be a beneficial area for future researchers to explore specifically in Chinese EFL education.

Using Technology to Innovate Instruction in a Chinese EFL Classroom

To further discussion on how Chinese EFL classrooms are using technology to innovate teaching, the authors offer an example of a how an EFL classroom at a school in China is working to innovate with technology. Through a digital writing workshop, one EFL teacher was able to adopt a more communicative approach to English writing. Moreover, she was able to improve her students TOEFL score as well as better engage them with writing.

The second author of this paper, Ms. Liu, teaches EFL to high schoolers at a private, international school in Beijing, China. Ms. Liu received her master's degree in the U.S., where she learned how to use technology and the communicative language approach. Though she still faces many of the issues discussed above, she works to incorporate what she learned in the U.S. in her teaching. After teaching for ten years, Ms. Liu desired to alter the teacher-centered instruction that is often seen within EFL classrooms. Specifically, she desired to help her students learn how to express their ideas and communicate via writing in English, instead of simply writing to complete an assignment given by the teacher.

In order to use technology to innovate her English language writing instruction, Ms. Liu chose to conduct a digital writing workshop with her students using blogs. She felt that blogs would allow her

students to take control over their writing, instead of simply completing an assignment with parameters, such as a specific word count in a time frame, as they typically do in class and with exams such as the TOEFL. She also wanted her students to begin developing their own identities as writers. Furthermore, blogs would expose students to people outside of the classroom, allowing them to interact in English with people of different backgrounds and perspectives, and adopt a more communicative approach to writing. The teacher believed this could help students develop new perspectives as well as have more motivation for revising and editing, since others would see their work.

To begin the lesson, Ms. Liu modeled how to use the Sina blog (blog.sina.com.cn) for her students. Students created accounts and were given a topic that they would research and write on throughout the workshop. Since students had to find information about their topic, Ms. Liu also instructed them in how to identify reliable sources. She also taught her students how to use social bookmarking and RSS to save and share online materials.

Students worked in groups on their computers to read each other's saved sources and share their bookmarked materials before writing. Each student brainstormed writing ideas with their group, and students were able to ask each other questions to verify that they understood the material. Following this activity, the students left their groups and began the writing process, which they worked on individually. Students were encouraged to use multimodal blog posts by incorporating pictures and videos. Students did not have a time limit and were able to finish outside of class. Ms. Liu felt that this would help make writing easier and more relaxing for the students.

After class, students read each other's blog posts and made comments in order to help prepare students for revising their work. Ms. Liu monitored all activities, led discussion topics, and commented on the students' blogs. To help students understand how to make useful comments, she adopted the idea of "dollar comments" (Parisi & Crosby, 2012; Lacina & Griffith, 2012), in which students must compliment the writer and make a connection to the blog. They may also ask a question to further conversation. These comments contrast with superficial "penny comments" (Parisi & Crosby, 2012; Lacina & Griffith, 2012) which are not substantial and do not relate explicitly to the blog.

Throughout the project, Ms. Liu noticed that the length of her students' blogs increased by 50 to 100 words, and they were writing 2-3 times a week instead of the previous once a week. Ms. Liu also noticed that her students were making more writing errors, but she thought this could be due to their willingness to experiment more with the language.

Ms. Liu also discovered that her students' attitudes and motivation towards writing improved over the course of the workshop. Before and after the workshop, Ms. Liu gave her students an open-ended questionnaire to hear their thoughts regarding writing. After examining these questionnaires, Ms. Liu noticed that, prior to the workshop, her students unanimously said they hated writing and only wrote to complete the teachers' assignments. They felt writing was agonizing and did not write for their own personal enjoyment. After the workshop, students reported feeling more relaxed while writing and were more confident in their ability to write. They also stated that writing was more fun.

Since examination scores were still important to her students, Ms. Liu gave 10 of her students a practice TOEFL test to see if their writing scores improved after taking part in this digital writing workshop. Eight students' scores improved, with 6 of the students increasing their scores by 1-3 points, 1 increasing their score by 4-6 points, and 1 increasing by 7-10 points. As a result, Ms. Liu demonstrated to her students that using an innovative, task-based teaching method, such as the digital writing workshop, also helps them improve their exam scores, even though it is not the same as the traditional method used to prepare students for exams.

By following this innovative teaching method with a practice exam, Ms. Liu was able to merge her communicative teaching approach with the exam-oriented mindset of the students. Moreover, she was able to demonstrate that her teaching method had been effective. Perhaps teachers should consider ways to blend the communicative approach with exams in order to begin bridging the gap that currently exists between China's national curriculum and the traditional focus on examination. In doing so, more teachers may find that, like Ms. Liu, they are able to show that the communicative teaching approach can help increase test scores as well as truly help students better communicate in English.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed the many issues Chinese EFL teachers face when attempting to merge the national language curriculum with practice. Though Chinese teachers still struggle to implement a communicative teaching approach, there are many technological and pedagogical tools that can aid in making the transition. Nevertheless, it seems that innovation in China's EFL classrooms may continue to be stifled as long as national testing remains at the forefront of education.

As we can see with Ms. Liu's approach, however, innovative teaching methods such as the digital writing workshop can be used to both help students foster better attitudes towards English language learning, as well as improve scores. In order for Chinese EFL classrooms to provide an innovative, communicative approach to language learning through technology, we can only recommend that Chinese EFL teachers consider how to begin blending examination instruction with communicative, task-based teaching approaches.

Future research should examine the relation of test scores, such as the TOEFL, and communicative teaching approaches to further support the argument that task-based language teaching is the best method for Chinese EFL instruction. Future studies should closely examine the effects of professional development instruction on communicative teaching approaches in the Chinese EFL context, as many EFL teachers are unsure of how to enact this pedagogical approach. Lastly, more research into the technological tools that teachers can use to aid them in creating a communicative environment in their classrooms—as well as with native speakers outside of their classrooms—is needed.

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KEY TERMS

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): An approach to second language acquisition that promotes learning through authentic communication. Instead of focusing on grammar and vocabulary and rote-learning techniques such as translation, CLT emphasizes meaning-making as the goal of language learning.

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT): An approach to CLT that uses tasks to motivate the learner as well as give the learner something to accomplish. This approach focuses on authentic language use, and ideally, real-world tasks.

Communicative competence: This term is widely used throughout the realm of second language acquisition. It is used to describe a language learner's ability. It differentiates from other terms in that it incorporates social behaviors, colloquialisms, and patterns of dialogue in addition to the traditional aspects of language learning, which are grammar, vocabulary, and syntax.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL): This terms has many similar terms, such as English as a Second Language (ESL). This term merely refers to learning English non-natively. It allows that a student might be learning English as a second, third, etc. language.

English Language Learner (ELL): A student who is learning the English language as a non-native speaker.

Target language: The language that a student is attempting to learn or that a teacher is attempting to teach.

Inquiry learning: An approach to learning that involves asking an open-ended question and seeking to find the answer the that question through research.

Serious Games: A type of computer or online program that is designed as a game, but is for the overall purpose of learning.