Culture and Curriculum Reform

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Abstract

This paper advances the argument that ‘cultures of learning’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996) not only affect people’s conceptions of teaching and learning – and therefore classroom practice - but may also impede curriculum reform, especially where little attempt is made at ‘cultural synergy’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1995). The paper first examines the ‘culture of learning’ in Mainland China, since Hong Kong’s overwhelmingly Chinese population is likely to share many of the expectations, values and attitudes identified here. The resulting language teaching is also briefly considered. Second, the paper reviews selected “Western” learning cultures and associated language teaching methodologies. Areas of similarity and difference are noted and a prediction attempted. The third part considers the ‘culture of learning’ in Hong Kong, an entity that is neither China nor Britain. This appears to possess a fundamentally Chinese ‘culture of learning’, much confused and confounded by factors that inevitably perhaps arise from its unique historical and international situation. After indicating, very briefly, these critical issues, the paper presents views from the literature which suggest that a lack of attention to and respect for cultural difference has impeded both curricular and language teaching reform. Supporting material from In-service assignments and reflections on lesson observations may also be touched on, if time permits.
‘Cultures of learning’

A useful concept for considering the impact of Chinese and “Western” modes of thought on teaching and learning in Hong Kong is provided by Cortazzi and Jin’s ‘culture of learning’ construct (1996). Seeing culture not merely as content but as ‘a series of dynamic processes’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999: 196), these authors define the ‘culture of learning’ concept in terms of an interpretative process involving expectations of classroom interactions. These concern ‘taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach and learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to the broader purpose of education’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996a:169). Such socially transmitted ‘frameworks of expectations and norms of interpretation’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998: 98) remain largely unconscious and form part of the hidden curriculum, influencing not only what occurs in the classroom but how it is interpreted, being either a bridge or a barrier to intercultural understanding and language learning. Cortazzi and Jin (1998: 101) also identify a yet more specific ‘culture of language learning’ embodying culturally mediated notions of how languages are best learnt and taught. As Cortazzi and Jin (1998: 98) put it, ‘the culture the learners bring to the foreign language classroom and its relationship to the target culture …has a deep effect on classroom processes because it is a significant factor in how teachers and students perceive language learning and how they evaluate each other’s roles and classroom performance’. Moreover, the ‘culture of language learning’, which can affect ‘teachers’ or students’ beliefs, classroom practices and their interpretations of each other’s behaviour … sometimes constrain or contradict … the pedagogic training of teachers and efforts aimed at learner training’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998:101). Significantly, these authors contend that the potential ‘gap in expectations, beliefs and classroom practices’ may be particularly severe ‘with “Western” teachers of EFL in China, or when Chinese students travel to the West to study’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998:.101).

The Chinese ‘culture of learning’

China, of course, is a country of great ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. However, as Gudykunst (1994: 43) notes, whilst diverging tendencies exist in every culture, ‘one tends to predominate’. So although ‘commonly observed patterns …. may not hold true for every member of a given culture’, they may embody the kinds of ideas and values that people tend to agree are true of themselves (Levine and Adelman (1993: xviii-xiv). Hofstede (1991), Brick (1991) and Bond (1991) place China at the collectivist, high-power distance, masculine, uncertainty avoidance end of the societal spectrum. As regards its ‘culture of learning’ this is held to be much influenced by the effort of acquiring the Chinese script (Bond, 1991; Coulmas, 1991; Biggs, 1996) Certainly, as Cortazzi and Jin (1996b: 175) contend, children are socialised into ‘a particularly long-standing culture of learning at an early age when they learn to read and write’ Since literacy skills acquisition demands considerable time for ‘demonstrating, imitating, tracing, copying, and repeating over and over again the writing of these characters (Cortazzi 1998:.44)’, this process almost inevitably fosters powers of memory and
concentration. This, in turn, ‘brings confidence and a feeling of success’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998: 104) and promotes a willingness on the part of children to expend much effort on apparently mundane, if not tedious activities. Parents, likewise, are expected to invest large tracts of time in the support and supervision of homework. Such is the crucial nature of this rigorous, time-consuming childhood endeavour that its impact on notions of teaching and learning per se is likely to be profound since its accomplishment represents the major achievement of primary education. Indeed, it confers essential elements of Chinese cultural identity and is the medium for accessing learning across the curriculum. However, Cortazzi (1998: 44), like others, is at pains to point out that, ‘what seems to be learning by repetition turns out to be deeper, more analytical learning’. Repudiating the oft chorused charge of rote learning, he notes how meaning and understanding are emphasised by the grouping and sequencing of characters which can be analysed for their 214 ‘radicals’ or component parts. This accords with the work of Marton, Tse and Dall’Alba (1992) who report the belief of Mainland teachers that understanding comes about through memorisation. Certainly, powers of perseverance are required since education remains highly competitive with Chen, Lee and Stevenson (1996: 84) revealing that ‘the chance that a Chinese child who has entered elementary school will be able to obtain a college education is less than one in twenty’.

Quite evidently then, learning is highly valued in Chinese society and learners engage vigorously with it from a tender age. It possesses not merely a cognitive but also a moral and social dimension - moral because it involves adherence to accepted standards of behaviour and social since there are strong collectivist expectations of group conformity. Moreover, ‘there is a strong cultural belief that everyone can learn … [and] reach the same level (Cortazzi, 1998: 47)’ since ‘effort can compensate for lack of ability’ (Cortazzi, 1998: 43). For most Chinese, learning primarily involves the diligent accumulation of knowledge with consequent memory work, attention to demonstrations and models, imitation, recitation, learning by heart, practice and display. Observing and listening attentively to others, attending to teacher explanation - sometimes through the examination of error - , cooperating with the teacher, and being ‘active’ through intensive mental interaction with the teaching (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998: 104) are, therefore, significant. Indeed, success is considered to be the product of hard work, concentration and rugged, unyielding determination. Creativity and originality are intended to follow, rather than precede, the mastery of the established canon of knowledge acquired by dint of understanding, memorisation and studious application.

Chinese ideas about teaching are also much influenced by venerated traditions. Ip (1996: 8) notes that the good teacher has historically enjoyed ‘a high level of authority’ in return for exemplifying high ‘moral standards and academic attainment’. More recently, Cortazzi and Jin (1997: 41), employing a survey instrument of essentially Chinese origin, ascertained the expectations of Chinese (and other) respondents concerning desirable teacher qualities. The dominant trait, as specified by 67% of the Chinese participants was the possession of ‘deep knowledge’. This was very highly significant when compared to British respondents, who surprisingly (or not), emphasised teacher disciplinary prowess more strongly than their Chinese counterparts. Patience (25%), humour (23%), moral example (21.5%) and friendliness (21.5%) ranked next, while metaphors of teaching were
linked to friendship (e.g. ‘a kind friend’) and parenthood (e.g. ‘a strict father and a kind mother’). ‘Generally’, Cortazzi and Jin (1997: 46) suggest, ‘the Chinese culture of learning [is] more knowledge-centred, while the British culture of learning centres more on skills, methods and organization’.

As regards the good student, expectations in the above study reveal ‘hard working’ to be the outstanding personal characteristic, this being mentioned by 43% of Chinese respondents (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997: 47). ‘In conformity to Confucian values, the Chinese gave as very highly significant more emphasis on showing respect to the teacher’, to ‘answering teachers’ questions’ and to ‘asking questions after class’. Surprisingly perhaps they also gave significantly more emphasis to ‘asking questions in class’ and to ‘volunteering comments in class’, suggesting scope for pedagogical adjustments in the classroom where currently ‘few children seem to ask [or are expected to ask] questions’ (Cortazzi, 1998: 47). Other areas of difference included studying independently, developing a good character and developing independent thinking.

The reasons for the apparent reluctance of Chinese children to ask questions in class, combined with their evident preference for pursuing enquiries more discretely after class, are of great importance, since these tendencies are often quoted as evidence of an inability to communicate, of shyness and of passivity. Cortazzi’s (1997) study certainly confirms shyness as the most frequently cited reason (40.7%) for not asking questions but argues that the desire to ask questions, which can be considered part of Confucian tradition, is inhibited by a variety of other factors. First there are the overriding cultural imperatives of obedience and respect. Secondly, in educational terms, the ‘learner needs to know before asking’, not ‘to learn by asking’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997: 51). In other words the learner must already possess a sound understanding of the subject matter in order to avoid appearing foolish or ridiculous, either by blurtng out facile, ill-considered questions or by making embarrassing errors in L2. Thirdly, Chinese learners are anxious to preserve both their own face and that of the teacher, since ‘a student who causes the teacher to lose face by revealing a lack of knowledge also loses face by showing a lack of respect by publicly shaming the teacher’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997: 52). Moreover, learners assume that all worthwhile questions will already have been anticipated and addressed by any competent teacher. In this respect, it is also noteworthy that a mere 1.7% of Chinese teachers reported using questions to encourage active participation (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997: 53). In the survey quoted, however, the mean scores for ‘liberated’ British respondents in respect of shyness, fear of ridicule and error and certain other dimensions were higher than those of the Chinese cohort, necessitating perhaps some reappraisal or soul-searching closer to home. However this may be, Chinese respondents felt that they participated ‘by listening, by thinking (and questioning in their mind), by asking questions after class and by discussing with each other after class’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998: 106). Class discussions, by contrast, were often considered ‘fruitless’ or a waste of time involving the risk of learning errors from peers.

Cortazzi and Jin summarise the key features of the Chinese ‘culture of learning’, which appear to possess some general validity. These are, as they put it, the ‘cultural elements
which Chinese students bring to the language classroom’ and ‘derive directly from the Confucian and Taoist heritage in Chinese culture’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998: 113).

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**KEY FEATURE** | **COMMENT**
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Learning is valued | Students should love learning, be curious, expect to learn
Learning is respect | Filial piety is extended to teachers. They are respected. Experts, parents, friends. Teachers give care, concern and help.
Learning involves reciprocal relationships | Teachers and students have duties and responsibilities to each other; both learn academically and morally
Learning is social | Self-development occurs in a collective setting. Key relationships should achieve harmony, not disagreement.
Learning means thinking and doing | Learning is incomplete without deep reflection, practical application; therefore students focus on products and results.
Learning is an apprenticeship | Learning involves long term strategies of hard work now for later rewards. It involves following a ‘master’ in word and deed.
Learning is enlightenment | Learning involves memorisation and accumulation of knowledge. What is memorised is later understood for further development and used for creation.
Learning is memorising | Memorising (even by rote) is a concession to the collected past experience and authority of others. Memorisation is part of progress.

(Cortazzi and Jin, 1998, p. 113)

All this necessarily affects approaches to language teaching. Indeed, Winser (1996:2) considers activities such as the ‘memorisation of texts, the mastery of grammar rules, intensive reading and translation exercises’ to be the result of venerated cultural traditions. In general, approaches to English teaching in the PRC are depicted as traditional, having:

a long-standing concern with the *mastery of knowledge*, which is focused on the four centres of *the teacher, the textbook, grammar and vocabulary*. Knowledge of English is transmitted through the teacher, as an authority, a source of knowledge and an intellectual and moral example. This knowledge is also in the textbook, which is a key element in Chinese learning; texts are taught and learned in
exhaustive detail; they are often memorized. Grammar and vocabulary are further elements of knowledge which are explained and transmitted; students engage heavily in memorizing hundreds, even thousands of words each year. (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996b: 65)

As regards grammar, the model employed often appears to focus on the form of language as an unapplied abstract knowledge system along the lines of: listen/receive, (compare/understand) memorise and apply in writing. Given that between 96% (www.hkta.com) and 98% (Crystal (1997:51) of Hong Kong’s population is ethnically Chinese, such ideas may perhaps form the bedrock of education in Hong Kong.

“Western” cultures of learning

It would be too ambitious here to examine in detail the more varied “Western” ‘cultures of learning’ with their concomitant curriculum philosophies, their conceptions of teaching and learning and their respective approaches to language teaching. In any case, these are likely to be familiar. A selection of OHTs is therefore presented as an aide-memoire. These attempt to capture the key elements of four influential phases and to relate these to the Chinese situation portrayed above. The four phases are: Classical Humanism/Academic Rationalism (Clark, 1987; Morris, 1996) with the ‘grammar-translation approach, Social Reconstructionism with the behaviouristic audio-lingual approach, incipient Progressivism/Humanism with the (PPP) communicative/functional approach; and the Progressivist, Humanistic, Child-centred approach with its constructivist, task-based approach. The table below, with areas of similarity in bold, then suggests that the Confucian Heritage approach is not dissimilar to the more traditional approaches of the “West”.

A conceptualisation of language learning in China and the ‘West’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Approach</strong></th>
<th><strong>General Features</strong></th>
<th><strong>Focus</strong></th>
<th><strong>Disadvantages</strong></th>
<th><strong>Model</strong></th>
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<td>China L1</td>
<td>Product oriented</td>
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<td>Onerous</td>
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<td>China L2</td>
<td>Product oriented</td>
<td>Consciously aware of</td>
<td>Conundrums</td>
<td>Listen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Deductive</td>
<td>Form/Rules</td>
<td>'Deaf and dumb' phenomenon</td>
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<td>Britain L2</td>
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<td>Audio-lingual</td>
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<td>Inductive</td>
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<td>function</td>
<td>Minimal Process</td>
<td>Function, Form, Discourse, Fluency and Accuracy</td>
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<td>Focus</td>
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<td>Descriptive</td>
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<td>Identify target</td>
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<td>Task-based</td>
<td>Natural acquisition</td>
<td>Meaning oriented</td>
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<td>b)</td>
<td>Product and Process</td>
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<td>Use/Skill-oriented</td>
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Predicting Hong Kong

Given the above scenario, one would expect the influence of the British colonial administration in Hong Kong (1842 to 1997) to appear successful only in times past when academic rationalism and Confucian ‘cultures of learning’ largely overlapped. Even then, however, the British influence would be likely to be secondary if not peripheral at classroom level, given the numerical dominance of the Chinese population with their profound cultural roots. In present times, the language teaching approaches of the West, such as communicative language learning and task-based learning, appear culturally far removed from the dominant Chinese model. It may, therefore, be predicted that the British influence is likely to have diminished rather than increased with at least some passive resistance to language teaching reforms, especially if these should be carried forward, as suspected, without due respect for the Chinese ‘culture of learning’ or any attempt at ‘cultural synergy’. Perhaps, given Hong Kong’s continuing international role in business and commerce, there is also the possibility of any resulting vacuum being filled by impulses from Pacific Rim countries, particularly the USA, Singapore and elsewhere, although this aspect in not a particular focus of the current investigation. Such predictions are represented by the following impressionistic (not Venn) diagram

The Hong Kong ‘culture of learning’ in transition

CULTURES OF LEARNING

[The past present boundary might, for convenience, be taken in a general educational sense as 1979 when compulsory schooling was extended to 9 years. In language teaching terms, it might be indicated by the introduction of the communicative syllabuses in 1981 (Primary) and 1983 (Secondary)].
The Hong Kong ‘culture of learning’

However great the political, social and economic dissimilarities with China, Britain or elsewhere might be, the Hong Kong ‘culture of learning’ appears to overlap with the Chinese model to such an extent that, for Hong Kong-based authors such as Watkins and Biggs (1996), the Hong Kong learner is almost synonymous with ‘The Chinese Learner’ – as their copious index references to Hong Kong rather than PRC or Taiwanese sources indicate. Education in ultra competitive Hong Kong is highly valued as ‘a ladder for upward mobility’ (Chen, Lee and Stevenson, 1996: 83), ‘material rewards’ and ‘foreign residence’ (Tang and Biggs, 1996: 159). Bond (1991: 18), for instance, notes that ‘childhood achievement is almost exclusively defined in academic terms’ with parents consequently exerting ‘massive [possibly counterproductive] pressure on their children to do well in school. Homework is supervised and extends for long periods, extracurricular activities are kept to a minimum, tutors are hired, and socializing is largely confined to family outings’. Chen, Lee and Stevenson (1996: 85) also suggest that ‘Chinese parents and other family members are [much] involved in their children’s learning. Parents set high standards for their children and spend large amounts of time supervising and assisting their children with school work’ They offer little praise, not permitting themselves to be easily satisfied. Indeed, express parental control emphasising obedience, respect for work and traditional order may ensure that the child’s weekend and holiday activities are also structured ‘around academically-related things’ (Chao and Sue, 1996: 103), so creating business opportunities for the over 800 private Tutorial Colleges or crammers (over half unlicensed) which proliferate. Hau and Salili (1996) therefore conclude that ‘Chinese children are reared in a [collectivist] environment where effort, endurance and hard work are emphasized’.

As regards the learners themselves, Salili and Mak (1988) found that ‘effort’, not ability, was [considered] the most important antecedant for ‘academic achievement’, ‘being wealthy’ and ‘career success’. This reflects a dynamic and optimistic cultural belief that ‘everyone is educable, everyone can become a sage, and everyone is perfectible’ (Lee, 1996: 30). This universal ‘human perfectibility and educability’ (Lee, 1996: 25) may be achieved through sheer diligence and will power and serves the betterment not merely of the self but of society and the family (Salili, 1996: 88). Indeed, Hong Kong secondary students attribute their academic prowess to ‘effort, interest in study, study skill, mood and ability’ in that order (Hau and Salili, 1991). Chao and Sue (1996: 105) also note ‘tremendous and consistent’ peer group support whilst Hau and Salili (1996: 132) characterise students as ‘self-effacing’ ‘modest’ and ‘anxious to preserve harmony and promote cooperation’. Moreover, as Biggs (1996a: 161-3) also points out, learning-related values acquired outside school in Confucian Heritage Countries (CHC) may render the gap between culture and schools, which by nature are generally not ‘user-friendly’ (Hess and Azuma, 1991), far less traumatic, perhaps even pre-disposing learners to battle on with seemingly disagreeable, repetitive or boring activities. ‘Schools the world over’, Biggs (1996a: 161) writes, ‘require children to be obedient, to conform to group norms, and to persist at what seem to them to be pointless tasks, values that are incorporated into CHC methods of socialization, but are actually discouraged in Western child learning’. Or, as Salili (1996: 96) puts it:
Driven by a sense of duty towards their parents, and influenced by cultural values which emphasize hard work and endurance, Chinese students take more personal responsibility for their success and failure. They spend much more time doing homework and drill than their Western counterparts, yet the majority still believe that they can work harder and are not satisfied with their own achievement.

The role of memorisation in learning receives particular attention in Hong Kong, largely because of an abiding interest in the so-called 'paradox of the Chinese learner' who appears to utilise only low level cognitive strategies and yet frequently outperforms Western counterparts, particularly in mathematics and science. Indeed, the 'extraordinary high level of academic achievement' (Chen, Lee and Stevenson, 1996: 70) of Chinese learners often occurs in an educational environment that would hardly appear conducive to academic success. 'Typically', Biggs writes (1996c:46) ‘CHC classes are large, in excess of 40 and over, and appear to Western observers as highly authoritarian; teaching methods are mostly expository, sharply focused on preparation for external examinations…. Examinations themselves address low-level cognitive goals, are highly competitive, and exert excessive pressure on teachers and exam stress on students’.

Whereas, however, the dismissive view is to stereotype the Chinese as passive, compliant and unthinking rote learners, Biggs (1996c) maintains that such repetitive learning techniques may mark a highly adaptive strategic choice designed to facilitate retrieval under assessment conditions and be indicative of deeper level mental processing that creates, rather than negates, meaning. This contention is supported by Lee (1996: 36), who argues that ‘memorizing (becoming familiar with the text), understanding, reflecting and questioning are the basic components of learning’. Even more significantly, Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1996: 76-77) explain how memorisation is both expedited by and contributes to deeper understanding. They, therefore, refute the facile equation of memorisation with mechanical rote learning as a flawed and misguided Western assumption.

Confounding factors

However similar the underlying educational values and attitudes of the Hong Kong population at large might be to those in China, the situation in Hong Kong is confounded by the historically founded issues of power and inequality suggested by authors such as Phillipson (1992) Pennycook (1994), and Tollefson (1995). The Hong Kong ‘culture of learning’ is therefore far from harmonious, being riven by a whole series of highly fraught and contentious issues. These weighty issues, which are the subject of intense academic scrutiny, also form part of the Hong Kong ‘culture of learning’ The contentious areas are here presented only in summary form: control and exclusion; monolingualism and the medium of instruction; teacher education and the question of standards; motivation and materials; competition and testing. Together they appear to have a debilitating effect on curriculum and language teaching reforms – since in the final analysis their combined impact seems to engender a ‘climate of externally justified helplessness’ (Hamp-Lyons, 1999) in practitioners, the (sincere?) efforts of government notwithstanding.
Evidence from the literature

This is not to suggest the undesirability of change itself, which in a city of international importance, is an economic as well as an educational necessity. But it does suggest, that top-down attempts to impose worthy but imported and culturally remote schemes are likely to result in mere adoption rather than implementation, especially since such reforms are often conducted with missionary zeal founded perhaps on an implicit assumption of superiority. Certainly, in Hong Kong, any genuine process of ‘cultural synergy’, which explicitly, respectfully and open-mindedly acknowledges and addresses issues of ‘culture of learning’ difference in the spirit of mutual understanding seems noteworthy by its absence.

This lack of attention to and respect for the beliefs of others is most evident with the recent TTRA (later Target Oriented Curriculum) initiative, which from the local ‘culture of learning’ perspective appears incongruent in relation to the prevailing primary classroom culture as well as deficient in relation to criteria of practicality, ownership, teacher attitudes, teacher training and available resources (Carless, 1998). From the start it was, as Carless (1998: 241) states, ‘undoubtedly a strategic error for the four [non-Cantonese speaking] main curriculum developers all to be of non-Chinese origin’. Noting traditional respect for education, the monolithic nature of the education system, the emphasis on pupil effort rather than ability and a persistent tendency to equate education with intellectual development, Cheng (1997: 38) states baldly that people ‘respect conformity in life and competition for the common good’. The concern for individual needs and diverse goals, he asserts, ‘appeals only to the few’. Hence he argues that ‘notions of individual-based and student-centred teaching have been slow to take root in Hong Kong schools’ (Cheng, 1997:39). Indeed, elsewhere he and Wong (1996: 44) point out that ‘[i]ndividualised teaching, where teachers work towards diverse targets at different paces, is almost inconceivable in East Asian societies’. This indicates a huge gap between grass-roots perceptions and the current Aims of Education blueprint whose first aim decrees that the system should ‘cater for the needs of individual students so that each of them can have all-round and unique developments’ (Education Commission, 1999: 11). Certainly, the fact that the reform was imported wholesale from a democratic, pluralistic society with fundamentally different conceptions of teaching and learning is a matter of concern, especially given the political overtones, Morris, Chan and Lo (1998: 200) suggesting that such measures are not unrelated to ‘a [sudden] wide range of policy initiatives designed to produce a more democratic system of government’. Perhaps, as Carless (1998:235) opines, more ‘learner-centred or discovery-oriented approaches are considered to be dysfunctional for the examination-oriented approaches prevalent in Hong Kong’. This apparent disrespect for cultural difference was also evident in the process of TOC reform, which began by disparaging existing practices, dismissed reservations as misunderstandings, spoke vaguely of vision when detail was required and eventually shifted responsibility and blame for possible failure from officialdom to the teachers ((Morris, Chan and Lo, 1998).
Supporting evidence

Evidence from In-service assignments (Glenwright, 1997) strongly supports the notion of TOC and the earlier Activity Approach are often adopted but not implemented, whilst reflections on lesson observation (Glenwright, 1996) and on-going lesson plan analysis suggests that in language teaching many traditional elements survive. For reasons of time, OHTs will be employed here. This paper contends that failure to address adequately ‘culture of learning’ differences is one of the root causes of such difficulties.

Bibliography


The Classical Humanist or Academic Rationalist Approach

- traditional, top-down, authoritarian
- origins in the study of Latin and Greek
- content-driven with transmission of knowledge in a lecturing style
- emphasis on cognitive development
- promotes broad, generalisable mental capacities such as memorisation, analysis, classification
- ‘to enlighten students with concepts and information .... derived from the established academic disciplines…’ (Morris, 1996:13)
- develops the intellect and powers of rationality
- problems to be solved through informed and balanced judgements and the conscious application of elements of knowledge
- associated with a small, selected academic elite
- associated with the divisive organisation of schools
- enjoys prestige as a vehicle for the transmission of received wisdom or ‘high’ culture
- based on the fixed mental capacity theory
- norm-related assessment
- reports with comparisons, class positions
Language Teaching

The Classical Humanist or Traditional Approach
(medieval times/19th century till early 60’s?)

- **grammar-translation** method
- originated from the study of ‘dead languages’
- ‘a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it, or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology or educational theory’ (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:5)
- reflects de Saussure’s (1916) view of language as ‘langue’ and ‘parole’ plus Chomsky’s (1965) ideas of ‘competence’ and ‘performance’
- concerned with the ‘ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech community, who knows his language perfectly’ (Chomsky, 1965:3)
- intellectual ethos of grammar lesson
- interest only in the **forms, rules and exceptions** of the language itself
- unit by unit, lock-step progression through the **entire range of grammatical structures**, graded intuitively from ‘simple’ to ‘complex’
units have an artificially contrived reading passage designed as a ‘display case’ for the week’s grammatical rules and structures (Widdowson, 1978: 78)

stories of little intrinsic interest or relevance having only ‘cardboard characters’

followed by ten, whole sentence comprehension questions

grammatical rules then elucidated by the teacher in a top-down, overt, deductive fashion

this knowledge about language was often expressed in complicated, abstract grammatical terminology to be learnt by heart

and then applied in numerous, artificial, sentence-type exercises stressing the manipulation of form and disregarding meaning

essentially prescriptive not descriptive grammar

L2 frequently compared to L1

learner to receive, become consciously aware of and reflect on these grammatical ‘truths’ and apply the rules in new context, bearing in mind the traps and pitfalls caused by ‘exceptions’

exercise intellectual capacities to memorise paradigms, mnemonics and de-contextualised vocabulary lists, to analyse sentences into parts and to complete a long series of sentence-based exercises
ultimately to write translations and essays and to study the literature of the target culture

lengthy, ineffective and usually de-motivating undertaking requiring abstract ‘mental gymnastics’

writing the main skill

whole-class, teacher-centred, lecturing style

norm-referencing

concern for standards

even ‘good’ learners usually unable to use the language

a pass = a certificate of near oral incompetence

high drop-out rate, many giving up disliking the target language, country and people
Social Reconstructionism

- profound shifts in political and social awareness
- dissatisfaction with traditional methodologies
- wish to improve the world
- new academic insights
- advances in technology
- optimistic - advances in society can be effected through deliberate and rational planning
- more egalitarian
- emphasised social justice, caring, tolerance and peace
- welcomed diversity and fostered integration
- contribution of each and every citizen to be valued
- young children to explore significant personal and social issues to ‘recreate and rejuvenate society’ (Joyce, 1972)
- focus on social injustices and inequalities
- associated with comprehensivisation, wide-ability classes and common core curriculum
- sought to mitigate social divisions
- objective-driven curriculum based on Needs Analysis
- exemplified by the concept of Mastery Learning
- behaviouristic
desirable end-objectives broken into constituent part skills and vigorously and deliberately practised
view that people’s potential for learning and retention appeared ‘almost magically unlimited’ (Bransford, 1979:15)
move away from norm-referencing
use of individual profiles
Language teaching - Behaviourism (60’s to 70’s?)
- strong influence of Behaviourism
- Skinner’s ‘Verbal Behavior’ (1957)
- language = learned verbal behaviour
- a set of habits
- imitation and practice till automatic
- thought to occur in L1
- other linguistic influences
- Austin’s Speech Act theory - performatives
- River’s (1964) - meaning always related to social and cultural settings
- Campbell and Wales - children able to speak appropriately
- structuralism inadequate - neglects contextual meaning/language as a whole
- interest in more relevant language functions e.g. requesting information, expressing wishes
- also advent of the taperecorder
- more authentic contextualised, colloquial dialogues
- primacy of speech
- four phase drill = S - R - CR - RCR
- wide ability classes
‘under appropriate conditions almost all [pupils] can learn whatever the school has to teach’ (Bloom, 1978)

- motivation, attitude etc. also important not just IQ.
- move from norm referencing
- balance of skills
- what pupils can do
- units have ‘real-life’, age-appropriate story setting
- characters and situation appear authentic
- integrative motivational outlook
- language introduced via filmstrip and taperecorder with choral repetition
- visuals convey meaning
- reading and writing held back
- assortment of practice exercises supported by flashcards, wallcharts, lab. exercises
- some role play
- target functions and structures drilled more or less meaningfully
- grammar teaching covert, rules to be learnt inductively but still top-down
- no terminology or explicit knowledge about the language - inductive
- teacher dominant - presents and models
- pupils imitate and avoid error
after a year pupils could use everyday language without conscious awareness of the rules
learnt a great deal about the target country and its people

But often mechanistic/meaningless, neglecting the creative, productive use of language by learners for their own purposes?

Undemocratic - learners serving the curriculum not functioning as individuals?

Risk-taking discouraged?

Lightbown and Spada (1993) - imitation only a partial explanation of L1 learning. Actually L1 learners produce erroneous forms they have never heard.

So language perhaps created from an underlying knowledge of abstract rules through an innate LAD or ‘universal grammar’ triggered by samples of naturally occurring speech.

Errors = overgeneralised hypotheses - which are later refined by further exposure to L2 data.
Progressivism

- child-centred approaches, relating to the needs and growth of each pupil
- these are ‘always advocated’ (CDC, 1983)
- learner as an individual with intellectual, emotional and social needs
- ‘growth through experience’ a key concept
- enabling learners to ‘learn how to learn’
- development of learner in and inter-dependence
- development of learner responsibility
- importance of human relations and ‘repeatedly experienced success’
- knowledge and procedures not fixed, certain or static but problematic, shifting and uncertain
- ‘One aim of the physical sciences has been to give an exact picture of the material world. One achievement of physics in the twentieth century has been to prove that that aim is unattainable...All knowledge is imperfect...That is the human condition’ writes Bronowski, (1973: 353) assigning certainty to the realm of the despot and tolerance to that of the scientist.
- active ‘learning by doing’
- activity approach in languages, discovery learning in science, cooperative or experiential learning in the humanities
- bottom-up approach with interest in procedure and process - methodology-driven
- identification of key concepts e.g. ‘causation’ or key procedures e.g. ‘experimentation’
- learning to be a historian or scientist, not memorising content
- pupils involved in inquiry and discovery, initiating question-posing, bringing to bear existing schemata, looking at data, making comparisons and classifications, and drawing inferences
- research methodology eg. finding out about the life-cycle concept and applying it in a new context
- ability to use first-hand sources as evidence, develop hypotheses and draw conclusions
- legitimise the search where definitive answers are not always found
- tasks to match capacity of the child, challenging but not too hard
- attention to individual differences e.g. sensitivity to individual learning styles
- idea of multiple intelligences
- pupils encouraged to reflect on their own experiences
- teacher as resource person and facilitator
- teacher to speculate and learn with the pupils
- open classrooms with movement
extensive use of projects or tasks that encourage creativity and communication skills
opportunities for discussion, negotiation, sharing through group work
criterion-referencing
Records of Achievement - an holistic view of the learner as a whole person involving portfolios and self-evaluation
cannot be contained within an objectives-based curriculum as knowledge is speculative and outcomes indeterminate
(Incipient Progressivism) Communicative (early 70’s - 80’s)

- Hymes (1971) speaks of ‘communicative competence’ and rejects Chomsky’s idealised ‘Garden of Eden’ view of language
- communication involves appropriacy not just grammar - socially sensitive view of language
- importance of context for meaning
- importance of discourse, authentic chunks of L1 data
- error = natural, inevitable, helpful
- unconscious second language acquisition through comprehensible input plus hypothesis forming and low affective filter
- so emphasis on use not usage
- on meaning not form
- on discourse not sentence
- on fluency rather than accuracy
- on real-life purposes
- on authentic language in context
- on an holistic not atomistic view of language
- with integrated skills
- more process-oriented
- involving selection, choice
- interaction
- conditions of doubt or uncertainty
- unpredictability, spontaneity, creativity
therefore one possibility = add-on (P.) P.P. (P.)

P. model

with emphasis on production phase with mingle, problem-solving, survey and information gap activities

lesson might have focus on real-world topic

Preliminaries (motivation) (P) = elicitation of pupils’ knowledge and experience through open-ended questions and follow up

interest in topic and pupils, NOT just grammatical forms

Presentation P. = semi-authentic dialogue with pre-set listening questions first on meaning then on form. Learners attend to the content, then discover target language.

concept questions and/or time lines elicit the function/purpose of the lang. Item or illustrate it.

Practice P. = controlled practice games

and freer role play

Phonology (P.) = perhaps some incidental aspect of pronunciation, stress, rhythm or intonation.

PRODUCTION P. = fluency activities where teacher endeavours NOT to interfere

all phases oral and all pupil-centred
Task-based communicative approach
(80’s to 90’s)

- underlying theory much the same but task determines the language to be taught not vice versa.
- so language requirements NOT determined by linguistic considerations (e.g. simple to complex, natural order of difficulty) but by what is required to meet the non-linguistic target(s) of the task (e.g. to build a model shopping centre)
- attention to grammar may occur before, while or after (or not at all -Prabhu)
- order of practice to production can be reversed, the deep-end approach = communicate with what you have, then go back and remedy problems.
- attention to features of a good task (see Candlin, 1987) e.g. exploration, negotiation, interaction, interdependence, comprehensible input, evaluation, divergent outcomes.
- also context plus purpose, challenge and level of difficulty
Some important points.

1. There needs to be a balanced approach involving both product (more form-related) and process teaching (more meaning-related).

   **Product teaching** will raise awareness of language, provide a sense of security and help learners consciously re-structure their hypotheses about L2 perhaps through analysis or having their attention drawn to L2 features.

   **Process teaching** will emphasise fluency activities that promote synthesis and the unconscious acquisition of language.

   Batstone (1994) points out that with product teaching the form and content of the language is decided ‘for’ the learner whereas with process teaching the form and content of the message is decided ‘by’ the learner. He contrasts ‘information gap’ and ‘context gap’ activities.

   The danger is that product type activities neglect meaning or that process activities fail to generate the desired forms - a sort of ‘critical gap’.


The need for balance is reiterated by Skehan (1994). He writes: **Excessive priority given to analysis will compromise the process of synthesis and the acquisition of memory-based fluency in performance. Too much emphasis on synthesis may well detract from the learner’s ability to be accurate and restructure. It will produce learners who are fluent communicators but who are not sensitive to the need to develop their control of the grammatical system (restructuring) or to the need to conform to its rules and conventions (accuracy).**

2. There is therefore a need for teachers to **regulate tasks** so that attention is given to language and form and meaning are always integrated - indeed not to do this would be an **abdication/dereliction of duty** (Batstone, 1994; Johnson, 1994). Only Prabhu’s South India project claimed to concentrate only on task. Where governments have sought to implement a task-based, target-oriented curriculum on a large scale, a consideration of language functions and structures could simply not be omitted.
As Harris (1993), writing in Hong Kong, puts it:
If the English curriculum is to be based on purposeful learning tasks, it is of great importance that the language elements of these tasks are identified beforehand and related to the stage of development of the learner.

Skehan (1994) suggests that tasks should be regulated according to code complexity, communicative stress, cognitive complexity and cognitive familiarity.
Confounding factors

Control and exclusion
Monolingualism and the medium of instruction
Teacher education and the question of standards
Motivation and materials
Competition and testing.
In-service assignments: Curriculum

5 claimed AA implemented

Fortunately, we introduce Activity Approach in classes P.1 to P. 3.. More resources can be found inside the classroom. Pupils in A. A. classes are more sociable. They are more willing to participate and involve in classroom activities. Moreover, they sit in groups which facilitate group work or pair work activities. So I think it can help the pupils to learn and use the language if the teacher can create a pleasant learning environment for the pupils. A. A. classes can really provide a good basis for task-based teaching and learning.

There are 35 pupils in the class [P.2D]. They have been applied the Activity Approach since they were in P.1 stage. That means they are used to sitting and occasionally working in groups. Worksheet is the familiar type of homework to them. The classroom setting is facilitated for doing activities. There are chests of drawers for them to store their stationary and files. A particular board is set for displaying pupils’ English work and there are also some extra chairs for gathering children in front of the class for special teaching activities such as share reading.

By comparison (18) indicated that it was in fact implemented in name only.

.... Activity Approach has been adopting in P.1 to P.3 classes. Therefore, this is an AA class. Normally, they sit in five groups. Each group has a leader. However, they
have not got much experiences if group works and pair works as the overcrowded syllabus in English lessons.

.... Activity Approach has been implemented in primary one to three pupils for nine years. It means that the school adopted the Activity Approach since it was opened. However, although the classroom seats are arranged in groups, most teachers carry out the lessons in the traditional way, i.e. “Chalk and Talk”. Pupils are not learning through communicative activities. For primary four to six pupils, the classrooms are arranged in traditional settings. Pupils sit in rows. In my school, pupils are not streamed. We have mixed-abilities at each level.

... Although the Activity Approach has been implemented in Primary one to three, it is found that only the settings, e.g. seats arrangement in groups, are set according to the Activity Approach. I have not taught this class before but know that the teacher carries out the English lesson in the traditional way that mainly focus on teaching structure and form. Pupils have less experience of group work and they less to use English meaningfully with real purposes.

The situation with TOC is similar, 8 teachers saying specifically that their schools did not have it. Two offered reasons.

In Hong Kong, most students’ daily contact is through the medium of Chinese and not that of English. It is also happened to my pupils of ....... School. The school is
adopting the traditional teaching style. That is the chalk and talk teaching method. Students seldom work in groups. Their sitting arrangement is certainly not in groups since there is no need to be arranged like that. The main concern of the school, the parents, the pupils and even the teachers is the result of the tests and examinations. Text books are the only source of the learning materials. Since the teachers need to complete all the text books for examinations, it seems to be impossible for them to work on task-based learning. The school, in addition, disagree with the adaptation of the TOC.

All schools under ....... have not implemented TOC because the principals feel hesitate and doubtful whether TOC is workable and successful approach or not. Task-based learning completely fresh to the pupils and to most of my colleagues, too. Since nearly all English P.1 textbooks changed to TOC edition, my school is using TOC edition P.1 textbooks this year. However, most English teachers still use the grammar-translation method. Most lessons are teacher-dominated.

In 3 schools TOC had advanced to P.2, whilst in 12 more it had just started in P.1. Two schools were intending to start in the next academic year. The schemes was described as totally/absolutely/completely new (7), very new (1), new (12), quite/rather new (4), still new (2), not familiar (1), different (1) and ‘strange’ (1). Typical comments were:
[XYZ] School (p.m.) has implemented TOC for two years. Primary one and two are trying out the Curriculum. All the teachers are responsible for making resources for the TOC classes. Therefore P. 1 and P. 2 pupils have taken lessons with some targets and tasks. But the problem is not all teachers are familiar with task-based lessons and rather like the conventional teaching with chalk and talk. …. Most teachers have to catch up with the syllabus and scheme of work. Only a few try to choose the appropriate resources and text from the course-book. Activities such as group work and pair work are seldom taken place for the ground that pupils’ badly discipline may cause chaos in the class.
In-service assignments: Methodology

Traditional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Little pair work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursebook-based</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Focus on grammar rules</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-centred</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Not learning through comm. Activities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils in rows/better discipline</td>
<td>15/2</td>
<td>Not learning through games</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly grammar-translation</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Little discussion/pair work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on structure and form</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Few activities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalk and talk</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>P-P interaction minimised</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T dominant/directive/decisions</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Trained to listen throughout</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little purposeful /meaningful p.use</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lots of extra exercises</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main reasons advanced for this approach are also tabulated.

Reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tight syllabus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pressure from above/outside</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finish syllabus/CB/exercises</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Heavy workload</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get higher test/exam marks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Much written HW</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No time to resource/share</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[the pupils] are used to traditional teaching methods that mainly focus on teaching structure and forms.

Teacher carries out the English lessons in a traditional way that mainly focus on teaching structure and forms. Pupils have less experience of group work and the less to use English meaningfully with real purposes.

For the English lesson presentation in my school, most teachers still use the translation method and teaching is focused on the formal structures. English lessons ... are very teacher-centered ..... 

The class is taught in the traditional setting. Teachers normally play dominant and directive roles in the classroom. Pupils sit in rows and listen to teachers throughout the lesson. Most English lessons are teacher-centred ...... The main source of teaching materials comes from the course book, and the grammatical and functional language items are the main contents of the course book.

In my school, all English teachers are advised to use English throughout the lesson as well as to use communicative activities to facilitate learning. However, most of them fail to do so because they have many things to teach within limited time. So interaction between pupils in class is minimized. Every lesson they are trained to listen to the teacher and to do much
written work to consolidate what they have learnt. Most of them do not show interest in learning.

,,, many of them [the pupils] are not interested in the subject since their level is behind the average standard. They cannot get any help from their parents since they came from Mainland China and they have not learned the language. Moreover the ..... school adopts the traditional approach in teaching English; teachers put emphasis on the importance of correct grammar. Doing exercises correctly are the target of learning since they want to get higher marks in the routine tests and examinations. Pupils sit individually [in rows] according to the seating plan; they seldom have chance to do group work for communicative purpose. In addition many teachers use Cantonese rather than English as the medium of instruction for English.
Reflections on lesson observations

Starting the lesson

Tendency to:

- be teacher-centred i.e. T. tells. ‘Class. Yesterday I went shopping and bought.....’

- talk about his/her own experience

- provide not necessarily true information

- use yes/no questions

- move almost immediately to ‘today’s structure’. The language is clearly the topic.

- use prediction (e.g., a partly revealed picture) but to get only one obvious answer

- pre-teach or revise vocabulary with some whole class or group repetition

- provide good visual aids/realia, but with little exploitation

- provide the written form immediately

- start the reading/spelling of individual words in chorus

- avoid individual questions either during the process of presentation or as a check on learning
Tendency not to:

- be pupil-centred i.e. T. asks. The pupils’ real-world/congruent knowledge and experience is rarely explored

- ask open Wh- or even either/or questions. Referential questions are often absent and the pupils’ experience/knowledge is not sought or valued.

- use follow-up questions. Little is expected and what the pupils do say is considered unimportant and is often ignored.

- have a real topic or, if available, to be interested in it

- re-work previously learnt language

- engage in real, unpredictable conversation

- use prediction and/or brainstorming to generate ideas

- provide sufficient choral/group practice of new lexis

- not to check on its short-term retention by asking individuals specific questions

- exploit visual aids fully

- not to see the class as a group of interesting individuals, so promoting rapport