



| [March 2009 home](#) | [PDF Full Journal](#) | | [SWF](#) |

ISSN: 1738-1460

[Home](#)
[Asian EFL Conference](#)
[Conference Listings](#)
[Editorial Board](#)
[Hard Cover](#)
[Introduction](#)
[Special Editions](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Voices](#)

[Business Divisions](#)
[TESOL Franchise](#)

Volume 11. Issue 1
 Article 13

Title

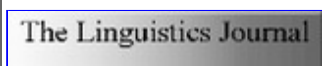
A new paradigm of teaching English in China: An Eclectic Model

Author

Lixin Xiao

Bio Data:

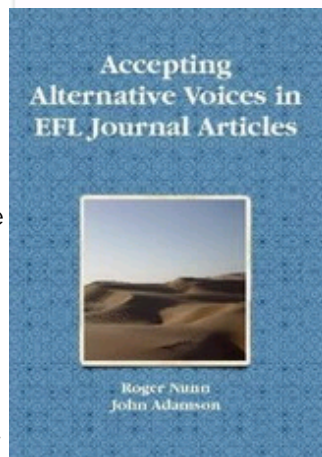
Dr. Lixin XIAO is a professor of English language education and Intercultural Communication at School of Foreign Languages, Tianjin Polytechnic University, P. R. China. He holds a PhD in L2 & EFL Education from the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University, Ireland. He has been teaching English as a foreign language at university level in China for over 20 years, and has got research and teaching experience in Canada and Ireland. His main research interests include teaching methodology, CLT application in China, critical thinking development in EFL education, and ESP. Dr Xiao has published widely internationally.



Abstract

This paper presents an eclectic model of teaching English majors the *Comprehensive English* course at the university level. The new approach to ELT described combines strengths from the traditional teaching, communicative language teaching (CLT) and the context approach (CA) (Bax, 2003) in order to suit the current English as a foreign language (EFL) context in China at the university level. It consists of three interrelated stages in teaching English majors the *Comprehensive English* course: *pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading*, and each stage focuses on different and specific dimensions. The new approach treats language teaching and learning as an organic process and includes reading at the syntactical level (bottom-up stage) and reading at the textual and discourse level (top-down stage). The top-down stage is more significant in language teaching because it is this stage that enables the progression of a synthesized approach to take place. The proposed eclectic model is different from traditional teacher-centred practices in which teachers tend to treat new words, phrases and sentence structure patterns as discrete language points and elaborate upon them over-meticulously while the gist of the text is usually overlooked. Furthermore, the proposed approach is aimed at helping teachers to overcome the weakness of teacher-centeredness. In this eclectic approach, the prevalent Chinese methods of teaching comprehensive courses are the starting point and CLT and CA are employed to complement them. The purpose for such a synthesis is

[2009 Journals](#)
[2008 Journals](#)
[2007 Journals](#)
[2006 Journals](#)
[2005 Journals](#)
[2004 Journals](#)
[2003 Journals](#)
[2002 Journals](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Author Index](#)
[Book Reviews](#)
[Indexes](#)
[Institution Index](#)
[Interviews](#)
[Journal E-books](#)
[Key Word Index](#)
[Subject Index](#)
[Teaching Articles](#) **
[TESOL Certificate](#)
[Thesis](#)
[Top 20 articles](#)
[Video](#)





Key words: - new approach to ELT, proposed eclectic model, prevalent Chinese methods

Introduction

Since the late 1980s there has been a top-down movement to reform English language teaching (ELT) in China. An important component of English language teaching reform has been an effort to import communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Chinese context (Hu, 2002). However, attempts to introduce CLT into ELT in China have provoked a great deal of comment and debate. Whereas some researchers have emphasized the value of adopting CLT in China (Li, 1984; Maley, 1984; Xiao, 2005), others have noted the importance of Chinese traditional ways of teaching and learning (Harvey, 1985; Sampson, 1984; Sano *et al.*, 1984). Still many researchers have focused on the need to adapt CLT to the demands and conditions for ELT in China (Anderson, 1993; Rao, 1996, 2002; Xiao, 2005, 2006a). Within this debate on English teaching methodology, the study of Chinese students' perceptions and attitudes to CLT deserves particular attention. Some earlier studies show that Chinese students are inclined to prefer a pleasant mixture of classroom-based learning activities that emphasize both communicative components of CLT and formal grammatical correctness of the traditional approach (Rao, 2002; Xiao, 2005, 2006). Therefore, an eclectic approach which can combine the strengths of different approaches as well as meet Chinese EFL learners' needs is necessary.

Communicative language teaching vs. the traditional approach

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been an influential approach for at least two decades. The very term 'communicative' carries an obvious ring of truth: we 'learn to communicate by communicating' (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.131). CLT advocates learning a language through use. In contrast with the traditional approach, which stresses teacher classroom dominance and a very detailed study of grammar, extensive use of paraphrase and the translation and memorization of structural patterns and vocabulary, CLT emphasizes the competence of using language for communication. Learning is regarded as a process of natural growth rather than acquiring isolated items of language. As learners have their own active mechanisms for making sense of language input and constructing their own systems while receiving linguistic input, what teachers need to do is to help them operate these natural mechanisms by providing them with "triggers". In lessons, teachers can facilitate acquisition by assisting students to practice so that they can learn to use language actively for real communicative needs. CLT has some common features of practice that derive from its basic principles. First, classrooms are learner-oriented. Second, opportunities are provided through developing a wide repertoire of activities. Third, the teacher's roles are multiple. Instead of imparting knowledge and skills to learners, s/he may act as animator, co-communicator or counselor in the classroom. Fourth, authentic materials are used in teaching. (Nunan, 1991, 1993; Mey, 1998)

Related research to date

China has the largest national population of English language learners in the world, and China is deeply involved in CLT since it was first introduced into the country in the early 1980s. However, due to multiple constraints including the linguistic competence of Chinese EFL teachers, China has had to work hard to adapt CLT to the local conditions. In China, most teachers claim to use a communicative approach in some way or other, and it is hardly surprising that no one wishes to be called a non-communicative teacher. However, as

CLT was borne and developed in Western countries, it is not universally applicable in Asian contexts without proper adaptation (Ellis, 1996; Hu, 2005). The problem lies in that modified varieties of CLT might suit some present conditions for the time being, but they are far from scientific, since, as practiced in the classroom, they are not usually selected on the basis of classroom-based or academic research (Leng, 1997). In many cases, whether CLT is seen to be difficult, effective, or is rejected as inappropriate, (i.e. reports on its implementation) have been based mainly on teachers' own perceptions of CLT (Li, 1998). Only a few studies have investigated learners' views, and fewer studies still, have looked at learner views of communicative practices in the classroom.

Some researchers argue for a combination of the strengths from different approaches (cf. Liu, 2004). Liu holds that English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers choose a teaching method not because of its professional or theoretical worth, but rather because it allows them to cope efficiently with the realities of the environment. In his opinion, if L2/EFL students are actively using the target language and teaching materials and activities meet the needs of the students, whatever teaching method is used does not matter much.

Many researchers contend that both the CLT and traditional approach have their own advantages and disadvantages. Hence, a combination of the strengths from different approaches is the best (Hu, 2002; Rao, 2002; Xiao, 2005). Horwitz (1988) suggests, classroom realities that contradict learner expectations about learning may disappoint them and thus interfere with the attainment of desired learning outcomes. Harvey (1985), based on his experience of teaching English in China, finds the constructive side of the traditional approach useful in class. He asserts that:

What might be called "traditional" methods and skills [in China] are not fundamentally or necessarily unworkable alongside modern EFL teaching methods. The idea that the two are mutually exclusive is absurd. EFL in China needs Western experience and expertise, not Western dogma. A balanced approach and the use of existing potential both have a fundamental part to play in the development of language teaching in China (Harvey, 1985, p.186).

Rao (2002) studied the views of 30 Chinese university students on the appropriateness and effectiveness of communicative and non-communicative activities in their EFL courses in China. He discovered that the students' perceived difficulties caused by CLT had their source in the differences between the underlying educational theories of China and those of Western countries. He argues that updating English teaching methods in China needs to combine the "new" with the "old" to align the communicative approach with traditional teaching structures. But his suggestions are far from pedagogically concrete.

Xiao (2005) conducted a large scale empirical study of Chinese English majors and their teachers at the university level. He reported that although both the students and teachers concerned were inclined to see classroom activities emphasizing the real use of the target language as more effective than those emphasizing formal grammatical competence, they, however, viewed it inappropriate to totally abandon the traditional approach in favour of CLT as the notions underpinning CLT are not very compatible with the Chinese ELT context.

In reality, what we can infer from relevant studies lies in that the real issue is not to abandon the traditional approach, but to improve and modernize it. In other words, to reconcile it with CLT in such a way that both approaches complement each other. Such assertions also support some earlier studies by some other Chinese researchers (Wen, 1996; Su & Zhuang, 1996). These studies reflect the reality that no single approach can cover all aspects of English teaching

and learning. In the case of CLT, various challenges confronting Chinese EFL teachers and students in their attempts to use CLT have to be taken into account and a synthesis of different approaches should be created to suit the Chinese context. Such views are also echoed by Western researchers as well.

O'Neill (1991) draws our attention to the characteristics of English language lessons that worked well using either teacher-centeredness or student-centeredness. He emphasizes that "the critical skills that teachers need are to use their discretion to judge and select which of the two types of approaches is most likely to yield fruitful results with a particular class at a particular time" (p. 290) so that the two approaches are complementary to each other. In other words, teachers should be aware of the necessity and importance of choosing an appropriate teaching approach to suit a particular situation or context since English teaching methodologies are neither culturally-free, nor culturally transferable without proper adaptation (Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Some researchers also point out that evaluation of a particular method depends on many factors, such as language and learning theories, teaching techniques, syllabus design and teacher and learner roles. One factor that is often easily ignored is that of *context*. A method that can be considered beneficial in one context may not be so in another. (Huang, 1996; Bax, 2003). Some Western researchers also support this view and make critical comments on CLT. For instance, Bax (2003) stresses that although CLT has served a useful function in the L2 profession particularly as a corrective to shortcomings in previous methodologies, CLT has always neglected one key aspect of language teaching, namely the *context* in which it takes place. Bax further suggests that the first priority is the *learning context*, and the first step in ELT is to identify key aspects of that *context* before deciding what and how to teach in any given class. According to Bax, the *context* refers to the teacher's understanding of individual students and their learning needs, wants, styles, and strategies as well as the course-book, local conditions, the classroom culture, school culture, national culture and so on. By taking into account all these factors as much as possible in each situation, teachers will be able to identify a suitable approach and language focus. Methodological decisions will thus depend on the results of a '*context analysis*'. In Bax's opinion, it may be that an emphasis on grammar is useful to start with, or perhaps an emphasis on oral communication. It may be that lexis will come first, or it may be that group-work is more suitable than a more formal lecture mode.

In congruence with the above pro-integration point of views from both Chinese and Western researchers mentioned above, this study shows that, in order to ensure effective English language teaching and learning outcomes, neither the traditional nor the pure CLT approach can be wholly embraced without adequate modification to suit the present ELT situations in China at the tertiary level. In other words, an appropriate approach will probably be an eclectic one, so as to meet the Chinese ELT context. Given the situation described above, China needs to combine CLT with the traditional approach to benefit from the combined strengths of different approaches. Any teaching methodology has its own reasons to exist. Everything depends on the specific situations -- the 'context' in Bax's term, where the methods are used and popularised. The teacher and learner variables determine which methods, textbooks, and teaching styles will fit in with the stated pedagogical goals. As is evident above, it is important that communicative features of CLT should be integrated into the prevalent Chinese pedagogical practices. For such a beneficial integration to happen in China, it is necessary for Chinese EFL researchers and teachers to take an eclectic approach and make 'well-informed pedagogical choices grounded in an understanding of socio-cultural influences' (Hu, 2002).

The purpose of this study

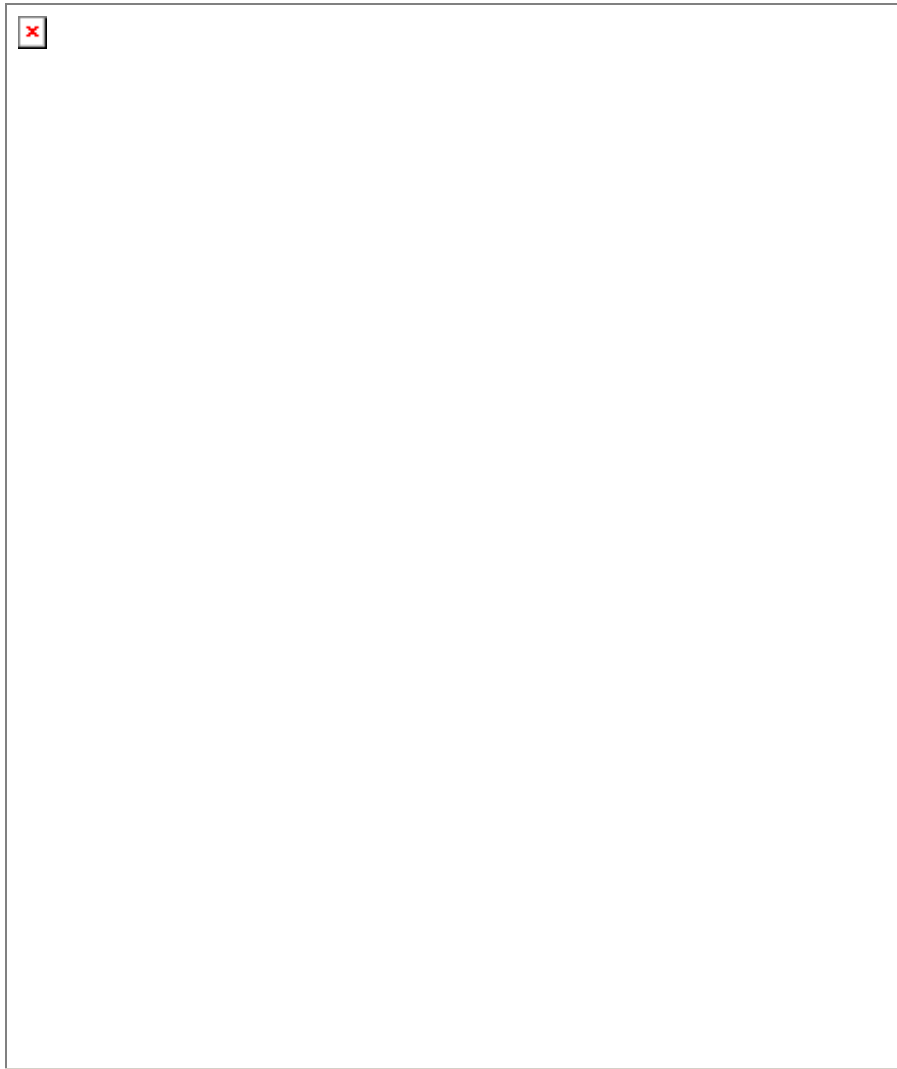
While the above studies report on Chinese EFL learner and teacher

perceptions in implementing communicative language teaching, few have looked at concrete eclectic approaches to teaching EFL compulsory courses in China at the university level, and as such, this paper examines the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course from the perspective of combining the strengths of different approaches with respect to classroom practice. This paper analyses an eclectic approach to teaching English to English majors at the tertiary level in China. It offers insights into the curricular and methodological changes currently being implemented in the Chinese context. The proposed eclectic model as shown below in Chart-1, combines the strengths of the traditional approach, CLT and the context approach (CA). It treats the Chinese EFL context as the most important starting point for establishing a suitable approach to ensure effective outcomes of EFL teaching in China. This new approach does not negate the view that language is for communication, but it questions the assumed universal applicability of CLT. Meanwhile, the extent to which communicative components in instructional practices are seen by learners as essential for classroom language learning should be taken into account when making pedagogical decisions. As is evident from the discussion above, at present this proposed eclectic model may offer a more realistic framework for EFL education in the Chinese context than merely rejecting or embracing CLT in a wholesale manner. Instead, the key issue of innovation in ELT methodology in China is not to totally discard the traditional approach, but to improve upon and adapt it (Harvey, 1985; Anderson, 1993; Rao, 1996; 2002; Hu, 2002).

An Eclectic Approach to ELT in China

This paper presents an eclectic approach for teaching English major students the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course at the university level. As shown in Chart-1 below, an eclectic approach in this study means, in a broad sense, the combination of strengths taken from both the CLT and traditional Chinese teaching practices that have proven useful and effective in the past. The eclectic approach also includes the ideas proposed in context approach (Bax, 2003). According to Bax, the context in which EFL learning and teaching takes place is a crucial factor in the success or failure of learners because contextual factors hugely influence learners' ability to effectively learn a foreign language (Bax, 2003).

In other words, an eclectic approach to ELT combines the strengths deriving from the traditional teaching, communicative language teaching and context approach in order to suit the current ELT context in China. It consists of three interrelated stages in teaching English major students the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course: *pre-reading*, *while-reading* and *post-reading*, with each stage focusing on different and specific dimensions. The new approach treats language teaching and learning as an organic process, and as such includes reading at the syntactical level (bottom-up stage) and reading at the textual and discourse level (top-down stage). The top-down stage is more significant in language teaching because it is this stage that enables the progression of a synthesized approach to take place. The proposed model in this study is different from traditional teacher-centred practices in which teachers intend to treat new words, phrases and sentence structure patterns as discrete language points and elaborate upon them over-meticulously while the gist of the text is usually overlooked. Furthermore, the eclectic approach is aimed at helping teachers to overcome the weakness of teacher-centeredness. In this eclectic approach, the prevalent Chinese methods of teaching *Comprehensive English (Reading)* courses are the starting point and CLT and the context approach (CA) are employed to complement them. The purpose for such a synthesis is to cultivate learners' communicative competence as required by the new curriculum (English Division, 2000) for English major students at the university level.



(Cf. Xiao, 2006b, p. 224)

It should be noted that an eclectic approach needs to be based on a multifaceted view of communicative activities in class. It should also seek to incorporate student input into the learning process. In some cases, it is appropriate to focus on assigned tasks and small group learning. In others, a whole class format is best, while in others, a combination of formats is appropriate. Therefore, methodologies vary with different variables such as learners' English proficiency level and knowledge about the topic under discussion, the content of text materials, teachers' competence in the target language, teaching styles and classroom management skills. In short, the methods and activities used depend on "a particular context where L2 teaching and learning takes place" (Bax, 2003). The following section presents a practical approach for teaching *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course as shown in Chart-2 below.

The choice of the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the eclectic model proposed in this study arises from the following considerations. First, the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course is the backbone of the course scheme in the curriculum for both English majors and non-majors. As the word "comprehensive" indicates, the *Comprehensive English (Reading)* course is supposed to combine multiple language skills in this course in contrast to its predecessor "*Intensive Reading*". ('Intensive' indicates paying a large amount of attention to a small amount of action, i.e. reading text materials). In other words, the emphasis is placed not only on grammatical structure and vocabulary, but also on speaking and writing skills and cross-cultural awareness. Other courses, however, are more restricted to specific

aspects of EFL learning. Second, for the first 2 years of the undergraduate program for English majors, the *Comprehensive English Reading* lessons takes up about 57% of the total of 1,100 - 1,160 class hours designed for English skill-based courses for English majors (English Division, 2000). The eclectic approach to teaching English reading is discussed in detail below.

Chart-2 Eclectic Approach to Teaching English Reading Skills

Reading Components	Pre-Reading	While Reading	Post-Reading
Student Information Processing	Top-down Processing	Bottom-Up Processing	Synthesis
Linguistic Focus & Classroom Activities	Introduction Raising Questions Audio & Video Aids	Semantic Items Syntactic Items Discourse Items Socio-cultural Items	Comprehension-Check-up Interactive Activities Oral Production Evaluating Outside Reading

Pre-reading stage

Pre-reading activities begin with questions to be initiated by a teacher. The teacher will start the lesson with thought-provoking questions rather than ask such questions at the end of each lesson to test learners' understanding of the text. These questions should be aimed at helping students better understand the meaning and structure of a text, to relate students' reading activity to their prior knowledge and experience, increase their interest in the subject to be read and enable them to read with a purpose. For instance, questions beginning with *When*, *Where*, *Who*, and *What* can prompt students to look for specific information from the reading material while those with *Why* and *How* can help them to probe more deeply into the information they are to read. In addition, such activities can help students predict or make some "educated" guesses about what is in the text and thus activate effective top-down processing for reading comprehension (Chia, 2001). Based on the stimuli in a text, such as the title, photographs, illustrations, or subtitles, *pre-reading* questions can be used to encourage students to make predictions about the content of the text, and help students better understand the passage they are going to read.

At this stage, it is important that teachers be aware of *what* to ask and *how* to ask questions appropriately based on the comprehension and linguistic proficiency of the learners. The way teachers ask questions ought to stimulate learners to think, speak, predict, judge and analyse. Nuttall (1983, 1996) classifies classroom questions into six types from teaching perspective:

1. *Questions of literal comprehension*: those where answers are directly and explicitly expressed in the text. They can often be answered in the words of the text.
2. *Questions involving reorganization or reinterpretation*: those requiring students either to reinterpret literal information or to obtain it from various parts of the text and put it together in a new way, using elementary inference.
3. *Questions of inference*: those obliging students to consider what is implied, but not explicitly stated.
4. *Questions of evaluation*: those asking for a considered judgement about the text in terms of what the writer is trying to do and how far s/he has achieved it.
5. *Questions of personal response*: those where answers depend least on the writer, but instead relate to the reader's reaction

to the text.

6. *Questions concerned with how writers say what they mean:* those intending to give students strategies for dealing with a text in general (pp. 132-133).

Nuttall's classifications can help teachers raise appropriate questions which can help students understand the local and global meaning of a text as well as how these meanings are expressed. For example, if teaching an English text entitled *International Trade*, teachers could assign students the following questions before they read the text:

1. *What are the reasons for international trade?*
2. *Why is it impossible for any nation in the world to be self-sufficient?*
3. *What countries are mentioned in the text (if any)?*
4. *Why does the writer mention these countries?*

To answer these questions, students have to be ready to deal with the text as an organic whole, preparing to sort out messages, select and reorganize those that they judge to be the most relevant and important to the questions they are going to answer. Here the passive reading process of input is inclined to become an active process of output, combining guessing, reading, predicting, inferring and speaking. It is crucial to note that teachers should not have preconceived, rigid notions about "correct" answers to their questions. Alternatively, they should allow student input to be genuine, and possibly, unpredictable.

While-Reading Stage

While-reading stage consists of reading a text twice, each for a specific purpose. The *first* reading concerns two important speed-reading techniques, namely, skimming and scanning. The training of these skills is of particular importance because these skills are not only indispensable for EFL learners, but also because during the process of skimming and scanning the schemata of students can be activated. Skimming facilitates text processing by initiating students into the gist and organization of the text. Scanning is helpful for seeking specific information for the pre-reading questions mentioned above. The *second* reading is a problem-solving process. The problems to be solved in this process of reading may include lexical, syntactic, discourse, and socio-cultural dimensions (as shown above in Chart-2) (Xiang & Wang, 1999). These dimensions are discussed in detail below.

Lexical and syntactic focus

While reading silently, students come across new grammatical and structural units and students have the opportunity to pick out linguistic or syntactic problems that cause them comprehension difficulties (e.g. long sentences, new structures or expressions typical of a particular writer's style). Teachers then ask students to raise their difficulties and try to interpret them according to the context. This can be done either individually or in pairs. Then, these problems are pooled and collected together. Teachers can ask students to discuss these listed problems in pairs or in a small group in order to elicit various replies or check how much learners have come to understand these problems. At this stage, the methodological focus is that learners would do the problem-raising, discovery and comprehension rather than the teacher covering the text in a sentence-by-sentence manner and providing answers to every single language point which may not directly affect the learner.

Following this problem-raising stage, teachers can synthesize these language problems and isolate major specific elements of linguistic units for detailed explanations from the point of view of

either grammar or stylistics, or both. Activities at this stage may include presenting different types of drills and students can do the exercises in pairs or in a small group.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is carried out in two aspects: firstly, how an idea is developed (such as topic sentence and support, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, generalizations and specifics, cohesion and coherence); secondly, how one idea leads to another (introduction, development, and conclusion). At this stage, questioning techniques (mentioned above in *pre-reading stage*), analytical, inductive and deductive methods are used to maximize the students' opportunities to practise their analytical and critical thinking skills.

Socio-cultural dimensions

Cultural background knowledge is also provided at this stage, which can help students to gain a better comprehension of the text content by minimizing cultural interference, and "build new culture-specific schemata that will be available to EFL students outside the classroom" (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1987). It will be especially beneficial if teachers are able to compare and contrast between the two different cultures. In addition, teachers should provide an opportunity for students to engage in personal text-based problem-solving discussions which can act as an important condition to enhance their cross-cultural awareness. Candlin (1982) stresses that [language] learning is a matter of managing problems. One way for teachers to encourage learning is to consistently confront learners with problems rather than attempt to remove problems in advance (p.39). This will help make the students more culturally sensitive when they read on their own. This approach is a striking contrast to teacher-centred English language classrooms observed by Xiao (2005), in which teachers paraphrased almost every language point of the text that they thought might be difficult for their students. Hence, teachers gave their students so much "help" that it became a crutch without which the students could not function. That is, the students were led to formulating word-by-word reading habits, while some aspects of learning that can lead to cross-cultural awareness and discourse competence were ignored.

Post-reading stage

This stage focuses on post-reading activities and checks students' comprehension, consolidates their language skills and engages students in communicative group activities. This stage includes students' answers to the pre-reading questions and further questions are raised by teachers at this stage to check students' understanding of the text. For instance, text-based questions of inference, questions of evaluation, and questions of personal response and so on.

Take the above-mentioned text *International Trade* as an example. After reading the passage, teachers can ask students a question of evaluation: *what does this writer contribute to your understanding of international trade?* Teachers need to be aware that questions of this kind are the most sophisticated of all because they require the students not merely to respond, but to analyse their response and discover the objective reasons for it, as well as measure it against the presumed intention of the writer. To answer the question, the students cannot ignore the textual evidence, so their responses essentially involve the writer's purpose. Also, teachers need to ask the students to explain why the text makes them feel as they do and ensure that students' responses are based on a correct understanding of the text.

Evaluative questions are also important with narrative and descriptive texts, in which the writer may tell a story or recount an event and then leave it to the readers to figure out for themselves the message that the writer intends to convey. Urquhart & Weir (1998) claim that "reading ability must go beyond pure language

skills and includes readers' pragmatic skills to interpret the text in terms of their knowledge and experience of the world" (p. 34). In this sense, after students read the text, they need to interpret the meaning to respond to the textual ideas and evaluate the effectiveness of the text. Teachers should be aware that while the meaning of the text is emphasised, the issues of how the meaning is produced (in what language form), and how students respond to the meaning of the text and how they evaluate the effectiveness of the text, should be also given adequate attention.

The post-reading activities can also be carried out in small groups or in pairs. Teachers need to make sure that such a group or pair discussion differs from a "question and answer" session in that students should be encouraged to express individual, unique opinions on the same topic. At this stage, the emphasis is on learners' ability to use the target language for communication and the exchange of ideas. Their responses should be incorporated, in an identifiable fashion, into the learning process.

To initiate and then to guide the discussion, teachers need to set forth topics to arouse students' interest as mentioned above and assign students a learning task or a text-based task -- what is known as "task-based" learning and teaching (Willis, 1996). Willis points out that task-based learning combines the best insights from CLT with an organized focus on language form (Willis, 1996, p.1). She defines "task" as any activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome (p. 23). Text-based tasks require learners to process the text for meaning in order to achieve the goals of the task. This will involve reading, listening or viewing with some kind of communicative purpose and may well involve talking about the text and perhaps writing notes (p. 68). Text-based tasks should aim to encourage efficient reading strategies, focusing initially on retrieval of sufficient relevant meaning for the purpose of the task. Willis (1996) observes that:

Task-based learning entails holistic processing, that is, gaining an overall impression, picking up detailed linguistic clues -- a combination of what are commonly called 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processes (p. 75).

Thus, task-based learning strategies would minimise students' dependence on teachers for all "the correct answers". On the contrary, each task to be completed by students is a step on the road to learner independence. In task-based learning, teachers can ask students to predict or attempt to reconstruct the content on the basis of given clues from part of the text without having read, heard, or seen the whole. For instance, teachers can ask students to predict problem-solution and story endings by using a text with a situation-problem-solution-evaluating pattern, namely, let students read/hear/watch only parts of a text which give the situation and problem(s). Next, teachers ask students to work in pairs or in a group to work out a couple of alternative solutions of their own, and then they evaluate another pair's or group's solution. When they have presented their best solutions to each other during a report phase, the class can be asked to predict which solutions are mentioned in the original text. Finally, they read/hear/watch the whole piece and compare and evaluate (cf. Willis, 1996, p. 77). If using a sequential text, teachers give students most of the text information and ask them to write (or tell) an ending, or give an ending, and ask them to write (or tell) the beginning. Teachers can scaffold students by giving them a few carefully chosen words from the text. In doing this, it is important to note that teachers should make sure that students do not feel they have failed if they predict something entirely different from the original text. Their imagination ought to be encouraged as this would help students improve their ability to make judgements on what they read, to express their own opinions and to grasp the structure of a text. In a word, learners' analytical, creative and critical thinking ability together with their

communicative competence will improve during the process.

These activities and tasks may include inference, reasoning, negotiation of meaning, problem-solving and information transfer. They may be carried out in a number of ways: group-work, pair work, individual work and role play. They should be an integral part of a successful EFL education programme. In many cases, suitable conditions, an active atmosphere and necessary staff training need to be created for the performance of these tasks and activities to occur in classrooms.

Suggestions for employing the eclectic approach in English class

Adequate attention given to balancing form and meaning

Balancing form and meaning is one of the critical features in the proposed eclectic approach, which is where CLT and the traditional approach diverge. Savignon (1991) points out that in L2 or EFL development, communication cannot take place in the absence of structure or grammar, because grammar is "a set of shared assumptions about how language works along with a willingness of participants to cooperate in the negotiation of meaning" (p.268). Widdowson (1990) also notes the importance of adequate attention to form in L2/FL development. He argues that the whole point of language pedagogy is that it is a way of short-circuiting the slow process of "natural language acquisition" and can make arrangements for learning to happen more easily and more efficiently than it does in "natural surroundings" (p.162). In balancing form and meaning, "the traditional approach and the communicative approach are not mutually exclusive" (Harvey, 1985, p.186). The real problem is how the traditional method can work well along with modern EFL teaching in the Chinese educational context. For instance, CLT focuses on meaning and fluency, whereas the traditional approach emphasizes form and structure. However, it would not be detrimental to Chinese EFL learners if the teacher explained some grammatical points to enhance their understanding of the link of meaning to the structure. Harvey (1985) reminds us that understanding the grammatical framework of a language is extremely important for L2/EFL learners.

However, teachers should not place undue emphasis on grammar and structure, which can prevent learners from understanding the text material at a holistic and discursive level. Grammar is a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse, rather than 'rules to be learned as an end in itself' (Rao, 1996). In addition, the real purpose of adequate grammatical explanation should be aimed at teaching students how grammar rules function, and thus showing students how they can ultimately use such rules for real communicative purposes. Excessive emphasis on grammar analysis could detract from developing the students' reasoning power and lead them to forming a habit of delving too deeply into the minutiae in their learning. In turn, this may impede the cultivation of their communicative competence and has a negative effect on development of their critical thinking ability.

Grammar teaching in English class should not be taught as an end in itself, but always with reference to meaning, social factors, discourse or a combination of these factors (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988). It is worth noting that teachers should be sensitive to the needs and learning styles of the students and make explicit to students the beneficial functions of integrating communicative components with the traditional approach. This inevitably requires teachers to adopt appropriate pedagogical strategies for a classroom progression in which both form and meaning is balanced.

Synthesising the progression of classroom activities

In adopting an eclectic approach, teachers need to adopt appropriate pedagogical practices to ensure a smooth progression of classroom activities in which both form and meaning are properly dealt with. The aim is to combine communicative components with the explicit instruction of form and structure. For such a smooth

classroom progression to happen in the Chinese context, there needs to be general pedagogical guidelines for Chinese EFL teachers to follow. A number of L2 and EFL researchers have proposed different types of integration concerning classroom progression for the purpose of combining communicative and traditional methods. Some suggest a progression from communicative to formal instruction (Brumfit, 1978) while some others suggest a progression from formal classroom instruction to communicative activities (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988; Nunn, 1992), from the activities of skills-getting to skills-using (Rivers & Temperley, 1987), and from text-based mechanical pattern drills to free communication (Rao, 1999;). Littlewood (1984) takes a more flexible stance and suggests that the sequence of progression of classroom learning activities is interchangeable rather than a fixed pattern and it is up to the teacher to decide -- based on such factors as the learners, the specific content of the text materials and the kinds of activities used.

Moreover, based on my own teaching experience, teachers have an almost free choice in deciding how many communicative activities they engage students in doing. Their decisions in this area are often made on the basis of their own professional competence, classroom management expertise and the knowledge and information they possess about the topics or learning tasks concerned. They also depend on the content of lesson and students concerned. However, one thing is certain that communicative components should be an integral part of the teaching process. Taylor (1983) asserts that students' needs and the dynamics of particular classes become major factors in deciding what to teach and how to teach it. Above all, the teaching methods adopted by teachers in class should vary significantly in accordance with the *context* in which teachers find themselves working (Sano *et al.*, 1984; Bax 2003).

Conclusion and suggestion for further research

To sum up, it has to be pointed out that if teachers know how to make good use of the *pre-reading stage* and the *while-reading stage* to raise questions, to offer background information, to solve problems concerning lexical, syntactic, discourse and socio-cultural dimensions, this will help learners initiate *post-reading* discussions. Students may become more interested in what they are doing and their attention would be heightened since these activities will create a vivid classroom atmosphere and enrich their prior knowledge. What is more, it helps them to link their existing knowledge to the text and directs them into a much deeper understanding.

As mentioned above, the pre-reading questions are helpful in that they help learners to make predictions and enable them to decide what they look for (either the global meaning of the text or the specific facts and details). The while-reading stage involves problem-solving and it helps students overcome the difficulties which may hinder their correct comprehension of the text. Post-reading is of great help in that it directs them into a much deeper understanding of the text and encourages learners to use their own analytical and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, communicative group activities can be organized to achieve meaningful goals assigned to different groups based on various text contents, to activate all those language items stored in learners' minds rather than concentrate on the minutiae of language points in a sentence-by-sentence manner as revealed in teacher-centred classrooms. Of course more research in this related area is needed to further refine this eclectic approach to foreign language instruction.

No matter how workable an eclectic approach sounds, there is no denying that further classroom-based empirical research should be done to test this approach. It is strongly advised that teachers should design and implement the proposed approach in actual classroom settings, and summarize its effect in terms of reading skills development, motivation, attitude changes on the part of students, as well as teachers' feedback in order to have this eclectic approach validated. For the future research, studies on more varied and

creative way of utilizing an eclectic approach for EFL classrooms are needed. Further, we may capture and readily access first-hand data in classroom settings for both research and pedagogical purposes.

References

Anderson, J. (1993). Is a communicative approach practical for teaching English in China? Pros and Cons. *System*, 21 (4), 471-480.

Bax, S. (2003). The end of CLT: a context approach to language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 57 (3), 278-287.

Brumfit, C. J. (1978). Communicative language teaching: an assessment. In P. Strevens (Ed.), *In Honour of A. S. Hornby* (pp. 33-44). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Candlin, C. N. (1982). Principles and practice in communicative language teaching. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 4(1), 36-44.

Carrell, P. L. & Eisterhold, J. C. (1987). Schema theory and ESL reading pedagogy. In M. H. Long & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Methodology in TESOL: A Book of Readings*(pp. 218-230). New York: Newbury House Publishers.

Celce-Murcia, M. & Hilles, S. (1988). *Techniques and resources in teaching grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chia, H. L. (2001). Reading activities for effective top-down processing. *Forum*, 39 (1), 22. Retrieved 28 Oct. 2004 from <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol39/no1/>

Ellis, G. (1996). How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach? *ELT Journal*, 50(3), 213-218.

English division of the advisory committee for teaching of foreign languages for foreign language majors. (1999). The history of FL education for FL majors at tertiary level: FL development along with the founding of P. R. China. *Wai guo yu [Foreign Language Journal]*, 5, 2-7.

Harvey, P. (1985). A lesson to be learned: Chinese approaches to language learning. *ELT Journal*, 39(3), 183-186.

Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 72(3), 283-293.

Hu, G. W. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: the case of communicative language teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(2), 93-105.

Hu, G.W. (2005). 'CLT is best for China' - an untenable absolutist claim. *ELT Journal*, 59(1), 65-68.

Huang, X. Y. (1996). A personal understanding of some main teaching approaches and methods in language teaching. *Teaching English in China*, 28, 11-14.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1986). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leng, H. (1997). New bottles, old wines: communicative language teaching in China. *English Teaching Forum*, 35(4), 38-41.

Li, D. F. (1998). It's always more difficult than you plan and imagine: teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4), 677-703.

- Li, X. J. (1984). In defence of the communicative approach. *ELT Journal*, 38(1), 2-13.
- Littlewood, W. (1984). Integrating the new and the old in a communicative approach. In B. K. Das, (Ed.), *Communicative Language Teaching* (Anthology Series 14, pp. 171-191). Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Maley, A. (1984). Reconciling communicative with traditional approaches to language teaching: can it be done? *Foreign language Teaching and Research*, 57(1), 42-48.
- Liu, D. (2004). Is the communicative approach a panacea? *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 1(1), 383-389.
- Mey, J. L. (1998) *Concise encyclopedia of pragmatics*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A Textbook for teachers*. Prentice Hall.
- Nunan, D. (1993). From learning-centeredness to learner-centeredness. *Applied Language Learning*, 4, 1-18.
- Nuttall, C. (1983/1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- O' Neill, R. (1991). The plausible myth of learner-centeredness or the importance of doing ordinary things well. *ELT Journal*, 45(4), 293-304.
- Rao, Z. H. (1996). Reconciling communicative approaches to the teaching of English with traditional Chinese methods. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 30(4), 458-471.
- Rao, Z. H. (2002). Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in EFL classroom. *System*, 30(1), 85-105.
- Rivers, W. M. & Temperley, M. S. (1987). *A practical guide to the teaching of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sampson, G. P. (1984). Exporting language teaching methods from Canada to China. *TESL Journal*, 1(1), 19-32.
- Sano, M., Takahashi, M., & Yoneyama, A. (1984). Communicative language teaching and local needs. *ELT Journal*, 38(3), 170-177.
- Savignon, S. (1991). Communicative language teaching: state of the art. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(2), 262-277.
- Su, D. F. & Zhuang, Z. X. (1996). *Xiandai waiyu jiaoxue - Lilun, shijian yu fangfa* [Contemporary foreign language teaching - theory, practice and methodology]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Taylor, B. P. (1983). Teaching ESL: incorporating a communicative, student-centred component. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(1), 69-88.
- Urquhart, S. & Weir, C. (1998). *Reading in a second language: process, product and practice*. London: Longman.
- Wen, Q. F. (1996). The correlation between traditional learning methods and non-traditional methods. *Xian dai waiyu [Modern Foreign Languages]* 6(1), 37-43.

Widdowson, H. G. (1990). *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Willis, J. (1999). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

Xiang, Q. J. & Wang, Y. M. (1999). Towards a realization of a holistic model of teaching reading in the EFL class in China. *Teaching English in China*, 36, 46-50.

Xiao, L. X. (2005). Do we reliably know what EFL students like in English classrooms at university level? *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 2(3), 67-94.

Xiao, L. X. (2006a). An empirical study of learning needs of Chinese English majors in a university context. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 8(4), 74-99.

Xiao, L. X. (2006b) *Communicative Competence and Critical Thinking: a Cross-cultural View of Chinese EFL Learners and Teachers in a University Context*. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Press.

Xiao, L. X. (2007). Bridging the gap between teaching styles and learning styles: a cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 4 (1), 55-78.



Part of the Time-Taylor Network

From a knowledge and respect of the past moving towards the English international language future.

Copyright © 1999-2009 Asian EFL Journal

| [Contact](#) | [Commercial](#) | [International](#) | [Publisher](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Related Links](#) | [Site Map](#) |