HOW CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE IS THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the suitability of the Communicative Approach (CA) for primary school children (aged seven to twelve) in Singapore, with a focus on *Chinese* primary school children. The paper begins with an introduction of the CA and the role of culture in the applicability and success of the CA in language teaching. This will be followed by a discussion of how the CA may be culturally inappropriate for primary school children due to the Asian-Confucian values and practices which do not favour the CA. However, this does not mean that the CA is totally inappropriate culturally. In view of the recent language shift in Singapore and the positive attitude parents have towards the learning of English as a communicative tool for their children, this paper suggests how the CA can be adapted to help primary school children, in particular Chinese children, learn and communicate in English effectively.

Introduction

The Communicative Approach (henceforth CA) for the teaching of the English language is not new in Singapore. It has been adopted since the 1980s (Ho 1998; Cheah 1998) and has been the dominant teaching approach used in Singapore schools. With the advent of globalization, the need to communicate in English is even more urgent in Singapore and Southeast Asia (Ho and Ward, 2000). This emphasis is mentioned in the examination syllabus for English language in Singapore primary schools:

> As the language of public administration, education, commerce, science and technology, and global communication, it has become the medium by which most Singaporeans gain access to information and knowledge around the world. The ability to speak and write English effectively, therefore, has become an essential skill in the workplace, and a mastery of English is vital to Singapore's pupils (Ministry of Education, 2001).

However, a number of writers have pointed out the cultural inappropriateness of the CA in the Asian context (eg. see Ellis, 1996; Collins, 1999; Critchley, 2004). How about the case in Singapore? This paper discusses the suitability of the CA for primary school children (aged seven to twelve) in Singapore, with a focus on *Chinese* primary school children. The Chinese form the largest ethnic group in Singapore, comprising about 77 percent of the population. The paper begins with an introduction of the CA and the role of culture in the applicability and success of the CA in English language teaching. This will be followed by a discussion on how the CA may be culturally

inappropriate for primary school children due to the Asian-Confucian values and practices which do not favor the CA. However, this does not mean that the CA is totally inappropriate culturally. In view of the recent language shift in Singapore and the positive attitude parents have towards the learning of English as a communicative tool for their children, this paper suggests how the CA can be adapted to help primary school children, in particular Chinese children, learn and communicate in English effectively.

The Communicative Approach and the Role of Culture

The CA underlines the use and function of language in its linguistic and social context rather than on form alone, and makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication (Galloway, 1993; Berns, 1984). Harmer adds that communicative teaching "developed from the idea that if children get enough exposure to language and opportunities for its use – and if they are motivated – then language learning will take care of itself" (1998, p. 32). A communicative methodology should include topics which are goal-oriented through the successful completion of a real task, and in which the learners have a vested interest (Taylor, 1987; Morrow, 1981). The students in communicative classrooms are responsible for their own learning and they do most of the speaking with the teacher as the active facilitators of their learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Communicative activities are helpful in providing whole-task practice where various types of communicative activity are structured to suit the learners' level of ability (Littlewood, 1981, p. 17). Through activities like role-play, report-writing and class representation, the children's speaking, listening, writing and thinking skills are developed at the same time. Positive personal relationships are also strengthened among the learners, and between the learners and teachers in a non-threatening class atmosphere where students interact freely with one another (River, 1992; Senior, 2000).

However, the CA is only efficacious if it is culturally appropriate; after all, literacy is a cultural tool and is the outcome of cultural transmission. This transmission is acquired by individuals only in the course of participation in socially organized activities with written language (Cheah, 1998; Ferdman, 1990). McGroarty and Galvan (1985) note that culture shapes one's views of language and education in profound ways, and these views influence one's expectations regarding the nature of language teaching and learning in the classroom (1985). Affirming this point is Nayar (1997) who asserts that sociocultural and affective domains of language learning make the simplistic adoption of pedagogical practices impossible. The role of culture is especially significant for children as they are socialized to use language in culturally specific ways which are carried over into the Second Language classroom (Cortazzi, 2000).

The Case in Singapore

How about the case in Singapore? Is the communicative approach culturally inappropriate for primary school children in Singapore? To answer this question, it is pertinent to look at some programs based on the CA which were introduced to the primary schools in recent years. REAP, LEAP and ACT are language-based projects spearheaded by the Ministry of Education in Singapore. REAP and LEAP are aimed primarily at children from non-English speaking homes (Sripathy, 1998). These programs were based on the use of real language and real situations to encourage the students to learn at their own pace. REAP stands for "Reading and English

Acquisition Program which was introduced to primary schools in 1989. Under REAP, two pedagogic approaches were implemented for lower primary classrooms in Singapore since 1985: the "Shared Book Approach" (SBA) and the "Language Experience Approach" (LEA). In 1992, the REAP project was completed but the communicative strategies it promoted continue to be used in schools as they were incorporated into the primary English language syllabus in 1991 (Ho, 1998, p. 236). The "Shared Book Approach" is modeled after Holdaway's cycle of behavior typical of bedtime storybook sharing time and the child's knowledge of spoken language learning (Holdaway, 1979; 1982). Through shared reading using Big Books in class, children can learn the English language in a secure, informal and cooperative manner. Tankersley explains how SBA is usually conducted:

> In the shared book approach (Cunningham & Allington, 1999), the same book is read and reread orally multiple times. For primary classrooms, the teacher often reads the story to the class during the first reading. During subsequent readings, the children often join in on parts of the reading, particularly when the book contains a predictable pattern or a strong sense of rhythm. During the readings, the teacher may stop periodically to ask or answer questions or discuss key elements of the text or images in the book. Thus the name "shared" readings (2003, p. 80).

Complementing SBA is "Language Experience Approach" (LEA) where the children's writing skills are developed through communicative activities. Sripathy explains that "by providing children with opportunities to talk about their experiences in the classroom and then guiding them to convey these in writing with the help of an interested adult, who models appropriate writing strategies and conventions, by framing open-ended questions, and writing down the children's very own thoughts, expressed in their own words, it is believed young children acquire the necessary writing skills" (1998, p. 270). Underpinning both approaches is the belief that a non-threatening environment with communicative activities is needed where the teacher welcomes all responses from the children and provides positive feedback. The other program LEAP, stands for "Learning Activity Program" which is targeted at academically weaker students. It aims to equip learners with the basic literacy and numeracy so that they are ready for employment. Ho explains that the approach adopted by LEAP moves away from the content and grammatical specifications of the traditional language syllabuses, and instead requires active participation from the students: "The starting point of the program was the belief that language is best acquired through use, and that the communication of meaning is more important than the teaching of form" (1998, p. 239). While REAP is meant for lower primary level, ACT or "Active Communicative Teaching" is tailored for upper primary levels since the 1980s. Such an approach focuses on a personal growth model that aims to include the learners' needs into the curriculum (Cheah, 1998). Under ACT, upper primary children work in groups to share their experiences and are strongly encouraged to be innovative and self-motivated. At the same time, the teacher acts as the facilitator and is less critical of the students' efforts.

However, how culturally appropriate are the REAP (SBA and LEA), LEAP and ACT programs, which are grounded on the CA, for primary school students in Singapore? A number of writers have pointed out the cultural disparity between the CA and Asian / Chinese culture in Singapore. Commenting on REAP and LEAP programs in primary schools in Singapore, Sripathy avers that the teacher-centered and exam-oriented approach in Singapore is at variance with the CA which underpins these programs. The Asian / Chinese perception of teaching as transmission - the children listening carefully and the teacher checking the children's understanding - entails that

"accuracy of responses and correction of errors took precedence over spontaneous participation and personal engagement" (1998, pp. 277-278). She concludes as follows:

> They [the two programs] encourage risk-taking and individual expression, and conceptualize the teacher as a partner facilitating the joint exploration of language and the world of stories. These are culturally unfamiliar to a large number of Singaporean children. They are practices and perceptions of learning that are situated within the lived experiences of white, middle-class families (Sripathy, 1998, p. 272).

Confirming Sripathy's (1998) claim is Cheah (1998) who also argues that the CA is culturally inappropriate for primary school children in Singapore as the cultural emphasis for rote-learning and examination orientation prevails. Based on her observations in one such classroom teaching, she notes that although participatory-type literacy activities were observed, "these were not carried out in the true spirit of holistic or communicative teaching" as they were "always nested in the larger, more dominant context of an examination-driven curriculum" (Cheah, 1998, p. 304). In her study on English language teaching in the primary classrooms in Singapore, Sripathy observes that Singaporean teachers, on their part, are less forthcoming in praising and encouraging their students as these are seen to diminish the teachers' authority (1998, p. 280). The above characteristics are not surprising as Singapore has appropriately aligned itself to the view that the neo-Confucian ideology is a sensible alternative framework for socio-economic and political organization (Gopinathan, 1996, p. 77). The culture in Singapore values collectivism, deference to authority, restraint and propriety; in fact, a recent newspaper article confirms that Singaporeans are not warm and spontaneous, but tend to be restrained and correct in their behavior (Quek, 2003, p. 8). The cultural disparity is further emphasized in the case of Chinese primary school children. Most Chinese children in Singapore are culturally conditioned to expect their teacher to be the authoritative figure in a teacher-centered environment. Ho explains that "in Chinese language culture, a very common thing to say is '*Ting laoshi hua*!' (Obey your teachers!), where parents regard their children as subordinate to them, where teachers are considered to be the 'parents' in school, and where school is supposed to be a place to discipline children, besides imparting knowledge to them" (2001, p. 104). A survey by Kwok, Chang and Ko (1993) reveals that 65% of Chinese parents in Singapore believe that children should obey and not talk back.

The above cultural trait is common in Asian countries where the pedagogical practices influenced by Chinese Confucianism are teacher-centered. A more authoritative and didactic teaching style, rather than a confrontational one, is preferred in Asian-Chinese societies like Japan, China and Taiwan (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). A survey conducted on a group of mainland Chinese students shows that 67 percent define a good teacher as one who has "deep knowledge", 43 percent regard a good student as one who is "hard working", and 40.7 percent affirm that Chinese students do not ask questions "because they are too shy" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Students in Asia tend to look up to their teachers as the repositories of knowledge and they are the recipients who respond to the questions set by the teachers. Teachers in these societies may place a greater premium on the student's willingness to learn than for them to question, challenge and demand. This stems directly from the Confucian value of filial piety to one's parents and by extension, one's superiors, where the focus is on what the children owe the parents and teachers, and not the other way round (Kinney, 1995). This does not mean that no respect is given to the students as persons; rather, adherents in such a society interpret the respect for the students in their traditional way. Besides, it is culturally difficult for Asian students to handle disagreements as the "student's

cultural background prompts him to perceive a difference of opinion as an attack on both himself and the group of which he is a part" (Osterloh, 1986, p. 81). This teacher-centered approach is attested to by Namsrai (2001) in her study of Mongolia and Ellis (1996) in his study of Vietnam. Feinberg (1993), who did extensive research on the Japanese society, reports that the Japanese value collectivism over individualism in their society. Cortazzi (2000) adds that Western teachers tend to view East Asian learners as shy, passive and non-participating, and neglect the fact that different cultural uses of language can affect classroom communication and perceptions. This Asian view of the teacher as the bearer of knowledge and the students as the passive recipients is also affirmed in the writings of Critchley (2004), Stapleton (1995), Brown (1994) and Jin and Cortazzi (1993; 1998).

Another cultural distinction is the value of academic performance as measured in the exam system for the primary schools in Singapore. Learning in Asian culture – especially in Chinese culture - is viewed as a serious pursuit and not one of enjoyment (Sripathy, 1998, p. 277). Based on her research, Cheah (1998) concludes that while the CA is ostensibly adopted in Singapore primary schools, its implementation is superficial. She reports that the English language teacher in the primary school that she visited readily conceded that communicative activities like group writing activities were at best "practice" and should not be taken seriously as part of the assessment. That same teacher believed that her "greater responsibility was to help the pupils do well in the examinations and to raise the percentage of passes in her school … the examination system is allowed to dictate literacy practices" (ibid, p. 304). This exam-oriented approach is not unique to Singapore. Kirkpatrick (2000) and Collins (1999) note that the grammar-translation methodology is the dominant method to prepare the students in Asian countries like Japan for the university entrance exams. Being exam-oriented, most students and their parents in Asia prefer the traditional method of teaching where the students are being spoon-fed by the teacher. Students steeped in Chinese culture, like the mainland Chinese students, "will often regard the less directive teaching methods of the foreign teacher as a waste of time" (Maley, 1986, p. 105). A typical reaction from students is cited by Cortazzi: "Why are we being asked to talk to each other and ask each other questions? The teacher should ask the questions and listen to the answers and correct them. If we are all talking in pairs together, how can the teacher correct us?" (1990, p. 59) Compounding the problem is the fact that Chinese primary children in Singapore are not native speakers, and therefore need more help in the learning of grammar. This is a feature which is usually neglected by teachers who adopt the CA. In his paper on the teaching and learning of grammar in Singapore primary schools, Chia points out that "with the subsequent emergence of the Communicative Approach, the emphasis on grammar teaching declined as the focus shifted from accuracy to meaningful communication" (2003, p. 117). Without a strong foundation in grammar, the children may be more willing to communicate, but will be confined to an impoverished and inadequate interlanguage, where grammatical errors remain uncorrected lesson after lesson (Collins, 1999).

However, it is useful at this juncture to point out that the Chinese primary children in Singapore are not homogenous. There is a need for teachers to note the diversity within a culture to avoid overgeneralization and stereotypes (Cortazzi, 2000, p. 77). While the CA may be culturally inappropriate for the Chinese primary children in general, the *extent* of its cultural inappropriateness varies from group to group. There are two main groups of Chinese primary children in Singapore: those from Chinese-speaking backgrounds, and those from English-speaking backgrounds. The learning of English in Singapore for the past 30 years has given rise to a population of "English-knowing bilinguals" - schooled in English and in their respective ethnic mother native tongues (Pakir, 1991; Kachru, 1983). This has been confirmed by official surveys showing the language shift between 1980 and 1990 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 1990). In 1980, only 10 percent

of the primary one cohort came from English-speaking homes but the percentage went up to 20 percent in 1998, and 40 percent by 1998. The number rose to 49.8 percent in 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004). This means that one out of every two primary one children come from English-speaking backgrounds. The CA that underlies the REAP, LEAP and ACT is more suited for Chinese primary school children from English-speaking homes where the parents are more educated and come from a higher income group. In fact, in her critique of "Shared Book Approach" (SBA), Sripathy (1998) argues that the program is culturally more appropriate for children from English-speaking background as "affluent, professional, English-educated middle-class parents in Singapore have been observed to adopt some of the white, middle-class literacy practices" (p. 272). On the other hand, Chinese children from Chinese-speaking backgrounds will find it culturally more challenging to learn in a communicative environment due to less exposure to English and a more Confucian upbringing.

Despite the apparent cultural inappropriateness of the CA for the primary children in Singapore, it is helpful to note that the parents in Singapore are increasingly setting aside their cultural preference and are positive about the communicative value of English. Fishman (1989) points out that language shift is possible when the people are open to change, forward-looking and culturally not conservative. The reason for the language shift is the change in the mindset and practice of parents in Singapore; the parents in Singapore are conscious of the need to totally immerse their children in one language during their formative years. Gopinathan (1980; 1998) observes that English is emphasized in Singapore for its utilitarian value – for employment and for guaranteeing access to the science and technology of the West. As the working language with an ostensible economic value, English is widely regarded as the language of career achievement and social mobility (Kuo, 1977, p. 23). Pakir observes that parents in Singapore, being pragmatic, will give up their own language in order to ensure that their children will survive with the languages of the new world order (1998; 2001). A survey in Singapore reveals that a majority regard English as a language of power (Xu, Chew & Chen, 1998, p. 144). This means that children and their parents from all social-economic backgrounds value English for its economic worth, and are keen to learn English as a language of communication. This is further corroborated by a survey on Singapore parents with pre-school children where 90 percent of them prefer their children to spend more time on English (quoted in Gupta, 1994, p. 161). The popularity of English has a direct impact on the Chinese-Confucian culture of the Chinese in Singapore. In a recent interview with the BBC, the Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew highlights the changing culture among Singaporeans:

> Singapore society used to be 'very Asian Chinese-Confucianist'. That has now changed because of the use of English, the exposure that television and the Internet has brought – and because Singaporeans travel extensively, and interact with tourists who visit Singapore. So, the interaction, the exposure, the external influences, external lifestyles, dress, social morass, has almost imperceptibly, but day by day, transformed the behaviour of our own people (*The Straits Times* 26 March 2004*).*

In view of the language shift and the premium placed on English as a communicative tool by Chinese parents, the CA is not totally inappropriate for primary school children in Singapore. Instead of rejecting CA wholesale, there is a need to tailor communicative activities to suit the cultural needs of primary students in Singapore.

Recommendations

Language teaching methodology for primary school children must take into consideration the special needs of the children as learners. The educators need to match their educational practices to the ways children think and learn by understanding the whole child and the nature of the language learning process (Reutzel, 1997; Gullo, 1992). Firstly, it is imperative for the teachers to provide a non-threatening and secure environment for the children in their language learning. When teachers are mindful of the children's feelings and are enthusiastic to teach, the classroom becomes a supportive and productive atmosphere, and the risks commonly associated with learning to read and write are minimized (Reutzel, 1997, Wasserman, 1992). Another important point raised by Reutzel is that children learn best when they move from the "known" to the "unknown" – when they engage in topics, concepts, and events that move from self, near, and the familiar outward toward the social, distant, and the unfamiliar. Collaboration rather than competition should be introduced, and the reading and writing outcomes and expectations must be reasonable and attainable for the children. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) add that the short attention span of children means that a variety of activity, pace, organization and voice is needed where speech, movement and the senses of the learners are utilized (pp. 5-6).

In the specific context of Singapore, there are a few points to take note of for the CA to be culturally appropriate for Chinese primary school children. Firstly, the introduction of communicative language teaching should be gradual (Nolasco & Arthur, 1986). In a culture that emphasizes collectivism, deference to authority, restraint and propriety, Chinese primary school children, especially those from Chinese-speaking backgrounds, need more encouragement and time to get used to the communicative approach which requires active participation. A number of writers have suggested the need to identify the cultural biases and recognize the non-communicative background, the particular learning styles and classroom preferences of the students (Critchley, 2004; McKay, 1992; Miller, 1992). The teacher is the "mediator" who acts as the filter to let the moderate ideas through while blocking the more far-fetched ones in the CA (Medgyes, 1986, p. 112). This is necessary as although the aim of the CA is communicative competence, it is simply too ambitious and impractical to launch directly into communicative activities if the students are neither ready for nor receptive to this form of learning. Goodman (1978; 1986) recommends "kid watching" where the teachers observe, record and plan the lessons according to the children's real-life reading and writing experiences. It is also useful for teachers to know the parents' attitude towards their children's acquisition of English so that both teachers and parents can gauge the child's progress (Tabors, 1997, p. 136).

To prepare children who are not acquainted with the CA, teachers could introduce non-communicative or pre-communicative activities before communicative activities are introduced. The teacher could start with traditional teacher-centered activities such as question-and-answer exercises with short responses from the children, before leading to more student-centred activities such as role-play and problem solving. This pre-communicative activity is similar to the "Engage" step recommended by Harmer (1998) where teachers try to arouse the students' interest to the lesson through activities like stimulating pictures, dramatic stories and amusing anecdotes. A culturally appropriate activity for Chinese primary school children which serves to "settle" them is to ask them to copy out a short list of words which they are going to use later (Halliwell, 2000, p. 23). As the Chinese children are culturally familiar with copying, this will serve as a bridge for

more interactive activities based on these words. Referring to the views of Stewick (1980), Taylor suggests that the teacher should begin with full control so as to create a secure, stable environment for the children before delegating more responsibilities to the children; he explains that the transition should be done "only as long as those students feel secure in knowing that this shift in responsibility is part of the teacher's overall plan, and there is no serious disruption of the effectiveness of the activity" (1987, p. 50). Likewise, Brumfit recommends that the children should begin by revising what they know, followed by the teacher presenting relevant language items to the students (what is unknown), and finally reinforced with drilling exercises to achieve effective communication (1980).

The CA should also incorporate the teaching of grammar and be combined with an exam-oriented approach in Singapore. Swan points out that what students need today is not more skills in communication, but lexical items to enlarge their vocabulary base (1985a). It is a misconception that communicative language teaching neglects grammar and exam practice. Littlewood clarifies that the CA includes learning activities such as different types of drill or question-and-answer practice aimed at providing learners with "a fluent command of the linguistic system, without actually requiring them to use this system for communicative purposes" (1981, p. 85). The teaching of grammar could be introduced either as a pre-communicative or communicative activity, depending on the needs of the children. Littlewood also believes strongly that pre-communicative activities are necessary for students to acquire a fluent command of the linguistic system. These could be teacher-centered and non-communicative activities like practice in the written mode, and more vocabulary building through elicitation and brainstorming of semantic networks (Critchley, 2004; Nunan, 1991; Ur, 1996). On the other hand, Thompson suggests that an examination of its grammatical forms should be introduced after the children are exposed to a new language in a comprehensible context (1996; also see Taylor, 1987). In this case, the teaching of grammar comes under the "Study" step (Harmer, 1998) where the students are asked to focus on the language and how it is constructed. This can be taught using various ways such as direct teaching from the teacher or group work with the children studying a reading text. Appropriate texts should be chosen so that students do not get distracted by a list of unfamiliar lexis and idiom (Swan, 1985b). In Singapore schools, grammar could be taught using articles from the local newspapers where familiar topics like Chinese practices and customs are chosen.

Once the children are comfortable with the teacher and are immersed in a number of pre-communicative activities to settle them, it is then culturally appropriate to introduce communicative activities. This is what Harmer called the "Activate" step where exercises and activities are designed to get students to use language as freely and communicatively as they can for a given situation or topic (1998). A culturally appropriate activity for Chinese primary children in Singapore is a speaking activity called "Making a fortune teller" (Halliwell, 2000, p. 72). This involves getting the children to make a paper "fortune teller" with numbers written on the flaps and mathematical sums written under the flaps. The children will then test their friends by communicating in English. The making of fortune teller will be engaging and familiar to the Chinese children as fortune-telling is part of Chinese culture. The incorporation of mathematical sums is also culturally relevant as the Chinese children are known to excel in Mathematics. "Activation" may take centre stage for the Chinese primary school children from English-speaking background who are more comfortable communicating in English, but not for those from Chinese-speaking background. For the latter, "Study" may be the emphasis to provide a firm grounding of the linguistic structures of the language before the children can confidently communicate in English for "Activation". Another culturally appropriate activity for children in Singapore is to get them to

role-play local television characters like "Phua Chu Kang" or their favorite local or regional stars like Fann Wong and Jay Chou. This can be done with students drafting a list of questions to interview these personalities, and then take turns to role-play as reporter and the character to be interviewed. Another activity is for students to perform skits to explain the origin of different ethnic festivals such as the Dumpling Festival for the Chinese, Hari Raya Puasa for the Malays, and Deepavali for the Indians. As the show "Singapore Idol" is currently very popular with young people in Singapore, another activity is for the children to organize their own version of the show, complete with singers, judges and host. All the above activities serve to encourage the children to communicate in English in a fun-filled and meaningful setting. Whichever the emphasis, what is important is the need for a "balanced activities approach" where a variety of activities which foster acquisition and learning is put in place (Harmer, 1983).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the need to take the cultural background of the children into consideration in the teaching and learning of English. In the case of Singapore, the CA is not totally appropriate for primary school children, especially those Chinese children from Chinese-speaking backgrounds where their traditional Confucian-Chinese values and practices are still dominant in the home. But with the language shift and changing mindsets of parents in preferring English for their children, and the increasing value of English as a communicative tool, the CA is a useful approach to help Chinese primary children learn English. What is needed is not a wholesale acceptance of the CA without regard for the cultural influences in Singapore, nor a blanket rejection of the CA because of its cultural incompatibility. This paper has demonstrated that the CA, when judiciously adapted to suit the local needs of primary school children in Singapore, can help them communicate fluently and confidently in English.

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