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Potential Cultural Resistance to Pedagogical Imports: The Case of Communicative Language Teaching in China

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Since the late 1980s there has been a top-down movement to reform English language teaching (ELT) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). An important component of this reform has been an effort to import communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Chinese context. CLT, however, has failed to make the expected impact on ELT in the PRC. This paper examines one of the most important potential constraints on the adoption of CLT in the Chinese classroom, namely, the Chinese culture of learning. It argues that CLT and the Chinese culture of learning are in conflict in several important respects, including philosophical assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning, perceptions of the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, learning strategies encouraged, and qualities valued in teachers and students. In view of such fundamental differences, the paper contends that it is counterproductive to take an 'autonomous' attitude, rather than an 'ideological' one, to pedagogical innovations developed in a different sociocultural milieu. It concludes by arguing for the necessity of taking a cautiously eclectic approach and making well-informed pedagogical choices that are grounded in an understanding of sociocultural influences.

In the last quarter century the English language has been gaining importance and popularity at an accelerated rate in the People's Republic of China (PRC). There has been a clear recognition of the language as an important resource that the nation can harness in its drive to modernisation (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a). English is perceived as a key to promoting international exchange, acquiring scientific knowledge and technological expertise, fostering economic progress, and participating in international competition (Ross, 1992).

Because of the superior prestige English has accrued in relation to the nation's modernisation program, English language teaching (ELT) has received a great deal of attention. The traditional approach to ELT in the PRC has been a curious combination of the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism, which is characterised by systematic and detailed study of grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, memorisation of structural patterns and vocabulary, painstaking effort to form good verbal habits, an emphasis on written language, and a preference for literary classics. As will become clear, this approach has taken root in, and has drawn strong support from, the Chinese culture of learning, hence its popularity among Chinese teachers and learners (Hu, 2001). The approach, however, has failed to develop an adequate level of communicative competence (i.e. the ability to use the target language for authentic communication) in millions of Chinese learners of English.[1]

To address this problem and to interface with modern developments in language pedagogy, there has been an impressive top-down movement to reform ELT in the PRC since the late 1980s. An important component of this reform has been an effort to import communicative language teaching (CLT) and implant it into the Chinese context. To promote CLT, tremendous efforts and resources have been expended on revamping curricula for various levels of education, updating English syllabuses to include principles and practices advocated by CLT, producing communication-oriented English textbooks, developing skill-oriented examinations, and upgrading teachers' knowledge of new language-learning theories and pedagogies (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Hu, 2001).

In spite of the efforts and resources expended, numerous Chinese teachers and learners of English do not seem to have gone through any fundamental changes in their conception of effective language instruction and in their daily practices. That is, CLT has not received widespread support and the traditional approach is still dominant in many a classroom (Hu, 2001). Although many teachers claim to be followers of CLT, this is often a matter of paying lip-service. In actuality, there has been resistance deep down to CLT since its very introduction. Both Chinese and Western ELT specialists (e.g. Anderson, 1993; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Li, 1984; Rao, 1996; Wang, 2001) have been debating on the necessity, appropriateness and effectiveness of adopting CLT in the PRC. An outcome of this debate has been the identification of a host of constraints on the adoption of CLT in the Chinese context which includes, among other things, lack of necessary resources, big class size, limited instructional time, teachers' lack of language proficiency and sociolinguistic competence, examination pressure, and cultural factors. As a result, there has been growing scepticism about introducing drastic changes in the classroom and uncritically adopting pedagogies that have been developed in totally different social, cultural and economic milieux (Chen, 1988; Coleman, 1996).

This paper examines the Chinese culture of learning as one of the constraints, arguably the most important one, on the adoption of educational innovations of foreign origin in the Chinese context. Specifically, it argues that CLT has failed to make the expected impact on ELT in the PRC partly because some of its most important tenets and practices clash with expectations of teaching and learning that are deep rooted in the Chinese culture of learning.

Tenets and Practices of CLT

Before the incongruities between CLT and the traditional Chinese culture of learning can be examined, a brief description of the tenets and typical practices of CLT is in order. As a recent reaction to traditional dogmas in the language-teaching field, CLT started in the late 1970s in Europe and gained momentum in the early 1980s. Since then it has taken hold and acquired the status of a new dogma. CLT has drawn extensively on developments in sociolinguistics, discourse theory, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, and second-language acquisition research that have occurred largely in the West. Consequently, it is based on a broad set of tenets about the nature of language and language learning.

What distinguishes CLT from the more traditional language teaching methodologies is its conception of communicative competence, rather than linguistic competence alone, as the primary goal of language teaching and learning (Brown, 2001). Communicative competence, as Canale and Swain (1980) propose, consists of grammatical competence (a knowledge of the linguistic system of the target language), sociolinguistic competence (an understanding of the dynamics of communication in social contexts), discourse competence (the ability to interpret individual elements of a piece of discourse in terms of their interconnectedness and their relationship to the entire discourse), and strategic competence (the ability to employ various strategies effectively to get communication done).[2] For proponents of CLT, 'the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse' (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 71). Therefore it stresses the interdependence between form and meaning, and tries to attend to both functional and structural aspects of language (Brown, 2001; Littlewood, 1981).

The learning theory underlying CLT is humanistic in nature. Richards and Rodgers (1986: 72) aptly summarise it in terms of three key assumptions: (1) that activities that involve real communication promote learning; (2) that activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning; and (3) that language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Given these assumptions, learners are encouraged to communicate in the target language from the very beginning.

The primacy of meaning and communication

While there are various versions of CLT, they generally share a number of pedagogical principles and practices. As its name implies, all versions of CLT take the position that meaning is primary and that teaching should be centred on communicative functions, rather than merely linguistic knowledge and the ability to manipulate structural patterns (Brown, 2001; Widdowson, 1990). In other words, social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language should be taught alongside linguistic structures, and knowledge of the target linguistic system must be matched by a practical ability to use the linguistic resources to achieve communicative purposes. Effectiveness of communication is sought after rather than merely accuracy or fluency, and language should be taught at the level of discourse rather than at the level of sentence, as most traditional approaches do (Celce-Murcia, 1991). To develop communicative competence, learners should be provided with ample opportunities to use the target language for communicative purposes and to learn the language through using it (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Thus teaching should be learner centred and experience based. In contrast to the largely passive role students assume as receivers of knowledge and performers of teacher directions in traditional approaches, CLT proposes that students should be negotiators, communicators, discoverers, and contributors of knowledge and information (Nunan, 1991; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In the same vein, CLT is firmly opposed to teacher dominance in the classroom and advocates a more equal relationship between teacher and student. Instead of regarding the transmission of authoritative knowledge as the most important task of the teacher, most varieties of CLT define the role of the teacher as one of a

co-communicator, a needs analyst, an organiser of resources, a facilitator of procedures and activities, a negotiator, and/or a learner. Collaborative learning is encouraged, and teacher talk gives way to pair and group work to provide opportunities for students to share information and help each other.

Unlike traditional language pedagogies that mostly grade and sequence teaching contents on a structural basis, that is, from what are perceived to be simple and easy structures to more complex and difficult ones, CLT insists that the selection and sequencing of what is to be learned should not be determined merely by structural concerns but by considerations of themes, functions, meaning, and/or tasks. There is a strong emphasis on extensive exposure to the target language through large quantities of input to and output from learners. This, it is argued, can maximise opportunities for negotiation and interaction between teacher and students, and among students themselves. And such negotiation and interaction are believed to be vital processes in the acquisition of a target language. Most versions of CLT also try to establish a link between classroom activities and real-world tasks, contending that the learning and use of language should be contextualised and utilise authentic materials, situations, activities, and tasks so that students can be better prepared to function in real-world communicative events (Skehan, 1998). Some of the favourite tasks include information gap, problem solving, discussion, role play, simulation, improvisation, debating, survey, and project work. Finally, CLT makes it a point to take the drudgery out of the learning process and to inject elements of entertainment, such as various language games, with a view to making learning become a light-hearted, pleasant experience.

The Chinese Culture of Learning

Although the tenets and practices of CLT as described above may seem natural and make intuitive sense to many language teaching specialists and practitioners in the West, some of them represent radical conceptual changes in the Chinese context and are in conflict with traditional Chinese beliefs about and attitudes to teaching and learning (Scollon, 1999). As the rest of the paper will show, a group of cultural influences may well prevent many Chinese teachers and students from embracing CLT. Following Cortazzi and Jin (1996a, 1996b), these influences are discussed within the Chinese culture of learning. By the term 'Chinese culture of learning' is meant a whole set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, experiences, and behaviours that are characteristic of Chinese society with regard to teaching and learning.

A caveat is in order: it is dangerous to generalise about the cultural behaviour of a social group, especially a society as huge and complex as the Chinese one. Nonetheless, as Cortazzi and Jin (1996a) argue, there are some culturally rooted assumptions of educational practice in Chinese society. These assumptions are often taken for granted and underpin Chinese models of teaching and learning.

Assumptions about education

Chinese conceptions of education have been much influenced by Confucian thinking (Biggs, 1996b; Lee, 1996; Scollon, 1999). There are several features worth exploring. First, there is a deep reverence for education. Confucius attached great

importance to education and saw it as a means of turning an ordinary person into a superior one and a weak nation into a strong one (Guo, 2001; Zhu, 1992). Largely because of this perceived role of education in cultivating people and strengthening a nation, education as a goal in itself has been internalised throughout Chinese society, even by those who themselves have not received any schooling (Cheng, 2000). Hence the saying 'everything is low, but education is high' (*wanban jie xiapin weiyou dushu gao*). Besides the reward of the soul that comes in the form of inner satisfaction with full personal development (Guo, 2001), Confucius also saw a utilitarian function of education; that is, education can bring along social recognition and material rewards (Lee, 1996; Llasera, 1987; Zhu, 1992). It is a firm belief in the Confucian tradition that through education, even a person of obscure origin can achieve upward social mobility (Lee, 1996). Arguably, these perceived functions and benefits of education have provided generations of Chinese with powerful motivating forces to aspire to success in education. They also predispose Chinese teachers and students to regard education as a serious undertaking that is least likely to be associated with light-heartedness but requires deep commitment and painstaking effort. Consequently, 'the Chinese tend to associate games and communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are skeptical of their use as learning tools' (Rao, 1996: 467).

Second, education does not concern only intellectual development but also the cultivation of moral qualities (Guo, 2001; Llasera, 1987; Scollon, 1999). The curriculum Confucius designed for his disciples was oriented towards literature, behaviour, loyalty and tact, and exhibited a combination of moral and intellectual education (Zhu, 1992). The notion that education is cultivation necessarily entails the inclusion of moral education as a major component of education. Traditionally, moral education included teaching how to relate to other people in society and cultivating moral virtues such as loyalty, fidelity, altruism, modesty and, conformity – that is, how to be a good person (Paine, 1992). This emphasis on moral development is still considered the basis of successful education (Cheng, 1994). It is widely accepted that both knowledge and morality are power. The emphasis on moral education, it would seem, encourages imitation of socially approved models and collective orientations but discourages individuality, fulfilment of personal needs, and self-expression – issues that are given priority in the CLT classroom.

Third, education has been traditionally viewed more as a process of accumulating knowledge than as a practical process of constructing and using knowledge for immediate purposes. Yu (1984: 35) aptly captures the traditionally understood relationship between the accumulation of knowledge and the use of that knowledge by comparing it to saving money in the bank and spending it later: 'When you put your money in the bank it is not important to be sure what you are going to do with it; but when you do need the money for some emergency, it is there for you to use'. Such a view is largely against those CLT principles that advocate the practice of teaching to specific needs and play down the acquisition of authoritative knowledge. Related to the perception of learning as a knowledge-accumulating process is the traditional Chinese conception of the source of knowledge. True knowledge has been popularly held to reside in written texts, especially classics and authoritative works (Scollon, 1999; Wang, 2001).

Thus, learning is equated with reading books. This is attested to by maxims such as 'it is always useful to open a book' (*kaijuan youyi*) and 'when the time comes for you to use your knowledge, you will hate yourself for having read too little' (*shu dao yongshi fang hen shao*). Presumably, this explains the centrality of textbooks found in Chinese classrooms. The Chinese conception of textbooks as the source of knowledge is largely incompatible with the tenet of CLT that students are negotiators, discoverers, and contributors of knowledge and information.

Another feature of traditional Chinese education is its emphasis on maintaining a hierarchical but harmonious relation between teacher and student. Students are expected to respect and not to challenge their teachers. The reverence with which a teacher is held is reflected in many popular sayings, one of which runs 'being a teacher for only one day entitles one to lifelong respect from the student that befits his father' (*yiri weishi zhongshen weifu*).

Last but not least, a fundamental assumption underlying the Confucian tradition of education is that innate ability does not account for success or failure in education. Confucius was willing to take in anyone who wanted to be educated, and insisted that 'no distinctions should be made in dispensing education' (*youjiao wulei*). There is a strong belief that everyone is educable and capable of attaining perfection. Although differences in intelligence and ability are recognised, they are not viewed as determinants of educational achievement.[3] What matters is effort, determination, steadfastness of purpose, perseverance, and patience (Biggs, 1996a, 1996b; Lee, 1996). As Cheng points out, 'the motto 'diligence compensates for stupidity' is seldom challenged' (1990: 164). As the following sections will make clear, the nature of the kind of teacher–student relationship that is highly valued, and the qualities desired in students, underlie classroom practices that CLT strives to avoid.

Teachers and teaching

The above conceptions developed in traditional Chinese education have shaped perceptions of the process of teaching and learning and expectations of the qualities that a good teacher and a good student should possess. The traditional Chinese model of teaching is one of an 'empty-vessel' or a 'pint pot' (Maley, 1982). This is most clearly reflected in the maxim that 'to give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water to dispense'. Such a model is essentially 'mimetic' or 'epistemic', in that it is characterised by the transmission of knowledge principally through an imitative and repetitive process (Paine, 1992; Tang & Absalom, 1998). Teaching methods are largely expository and the teaching process is teacher-dominated (Biggs, 1996b). The teacher selects points of knowledge from authoritative sources (usually textbooks and classics), interprets, analyses and elaborates on these points for the students, helps them connect the new points of knowledge with old knowledge, and delivers a carefully sequenced and optimally mediated dose of knowledge for the students to memorise, repeat, and understand.

The immediate importance and potential application of the knowledge taught may not be transparent to the students, but it is believed that to internalise the carefully selected knowledge is essential for laying a foundation on which further understanding, reflective thinking, and discrimination can build. The rationale behind this is that 'learners must first master the basics and only when

this is accomplished are they in a position to use what they have mastered in a creative manner' (Brick, 1991:154). Therefore, the focus of teaching is not on how teachers and students can create, construct, and apply knowledge in an experiential approach, but on how extant authoritative knowledge can be transmitted and internalised in a most effective and efficient way (Brick, 1991; Jin & Cortazzi, 1995). The 'learn by using' approach promoted by communicative language teaching does not fit in with the traditional 'learn to use' philosophy.

Given the fundamental values associated with education and the deep-rooted perceptions of the nature and process of teaching, there are certain popularly shared expectations about the role of the teacher. To cultivate good citizenship, a teacher must first and foremost be a paragon of socially desired behaviour for his or her students to emulate (Scollon, 1999; Yu, 1984). The social and moral obligations of Chinese teachers are clearly reflected in various honorific titles, such as 'the people's teachers', 'engineers of the human soul', 'sculptors for the future', and 'gardeners'. Second, teachers are expected to play the role of a mentor or parent. Good teachers are those who are caring, helpful, willing to pass on their experiences to the students, and ready to teach them about life (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Jones, 1995; Rao, 1996). They make themselves available for pastoral advice on the best course of action for a range of issues from the correct way of studying to most personal problems (Brick, 1991; Cortazzi & Jin, 1994; Yu, 1984). Third, it is a teacher's fundamental responsibility to ensure that all students progress satisfactorily (Cheng, 1990; Ross, 1993). If a student fails to learn what is taught or progress in a satisfactory manner, it is considered, to a very high degree, a result of the teacher's failure to motivate the student to learn, to present knowledge clearly enough, or to supervise the learning process. Because of these perceived roles of teachers, it is difficult for Chinese teachers and students to accept any pedagogical practice that tends to put teachers on a par with their students and detracts from teacher authority. In particular, it is against Chinese expectations to adopt a pedagogy that may put teachers at the risk of losing face. In this connection, many Chinese teachers of English find CLT highly threatening because it requires a high level of proficiency in the target language and strong sociolinguistic competence in the target language culture which they lack.

It follows from the traditional Chinese epistemic model of teaching that a teacher is expected to be a virtuoso of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Paine, 1990). To make sure that knowledge can be transmitted correctly and appropriately, the teacher must have already mastered a profound body of knowledge and have effective skills to impart his or her knowledge 'in the most accessible way possible' (Brick, 1991: 155). Thus a good teacher is one who knows what is useful and important to the students, has an intimate knowledge of the students' level, carefully prepares lessons, has all the correct answers at all times, and dissects, presents and explains knowledge in a masterly manner to ensure ease of learning by the students. It is a common belief that a teacher must assume a directive role, having the sole prerogative in deciding what to teach and exerting complete control over the class all the time (Tang & Absalom, 1998). This is to make class events fully predictable, guarantee the smooth delivery of carefully planned contents, and give a sense of security to both teacher and student. Another exclusive responsibility of teachers is to evaluate their students' prog-

ress. It is taken for granted that the teacher as knower and giver of knowledge has the sole right to evaluate the students' performance.

It is for this reason that both Chinese teachers and students tend to be suspicious of activities like peer evaluation, as they believe it is the teacher's job to evaluate and that peers are not qualified to correct others' work (Jones, 1995). Given these expectations about Chinese teachers, it is little wonder that learner-centred, interactive methodologies such as CLT that allow freedom, unpredictability, spontaneity, and student initiatives in the classroom are generally not well received (Li, 1984). By the same token, traditional pedagogical approaches like the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism that offer teachers maximum planning/control and opportunity to transmit knowledge are in favour with most Chinese teachers.

Learners and learning

Perceptions of the importance of education and the nature of learning have inevitably impinged on what is valued most in a Chinese student. To begin with, students should have positive attitudes towards learning and schoolwork (Salili, 1996). They should be keen on pursuing ever more knowledge, because a precondition for being a good learner is to know more (Paine, 1990). Second, in line with the transmission model of teaching, students should maintain a high level of receptiveness, wholeheartedly embracing the knowledge from their teacher or books. They are expected to respect and cooperate with their teacher (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b) and not to challenge the transmitted knowledge or present their own ideas until they have mastered sufficient knowledge to make informed judgements (Brick, 1991). Third, students should aspire to high academic achievement so as to be useful people to society, 'to glorify their ancestry' (*guangzong yaozu*), and to bring pride to their family (Lee, 1996; Salili, 1996).

To achieve all these, they must take learning seriously, be prepared to sacrifice other pursuits (e.g. social life) for the sake of study, and be willing to spend a great deal of time on study, even on apparently boring tasks. They should never be complacent with their own progress and always set themselves more difficult goals (Wang, 2001). They must have the diligence, fortitude, perseverance, and patience 'to grind an iron bar into a needle', as a Chinese proverb puts it. In addition, students are required to be mentally active (rather than verbally active), intolerant of ambiguity and striving for precision in understanding. Because of these expectations and the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, Chinese students tend to feel uneasy in a more egalitarian communicative learning environment and find it difficult to suspend their beliefs to engage in light-hearted learning activities on the one hand and critical self-expression on the other.

Four R's and four M's

The learning strategies commonly practised in the Chinese culture of learning can be summarised as four R's and four M's. First, learning is essentially a process of *reception*. Students are expected to receive and retain, with an open mind and without preconceptions, the knowledge imparted by their teachers and textbooks (Paine, 1991). This is illustrated by maxims such as ' Mount Tai makes itself high because it does not reject even the tiniest lump of earth; rivers

and seas make themselves deep because they do not refuse even the smallest brook'. Second, learning is also a process of *repetition*. It is believed that to acquire knowledge and understanding, students need to repeatedly study what they do not understand (Marton *et al.*, 1996). The belief in the role of repetition in helping to bring out understanding is reflected in the Chinese saying 'read one hundred times, and the meaning will emerge'. Like reception and repetition, *review* is also perceived as a key element of successful learning (Wang, 2001). Students review what they have received and repeated not only to consolidate learning but also to gain new knowledge and to deepen understanding. As Confucius exhorted, 'by reviewing the old, one learns the new' (*wengu zhixin*). This means when students attain, through constant reviewing, a fuller understanding of what they have already learned, it becomes newly acquired knowledge to them (Yu, 1984). The last R of learning is *reproduction*. Students are expected to be able to accurately reproduce the transmitted textual knowledge on demand from the teacher or tests (Paine, 1992; Rao, 1996). Failing to do so is generally taken as an indication of lack of mastery of required knowledge. Clearly, there are tensions between these culturally-rooted perceptions/practices and educational approaches that promote student-centredness, flexible reading strategies, constant exposure to large quantities of new material, and critical transformation of knowledge.

The four M's of learning strategies valued in the Chinese tradition are *meticulosity*, *memorisation*, *mental activeness*, and *mastery*. Meticulosity refers to attention to the smallest detail of knowledge. There is no tolerance for ambiguity. Biggs (1996b) speculates that the Chinese tendency to attend to details could have been influenced by the nature of learning to read in Chinese. Learning the thousands of Chinese characters and comprehending shifts and shades of multi-layered meanings residing in the juxtaposition of a limited number of characters encourage fine analysis of details (Parry, 1996; Zhang, 1983). Memorisation is the most valued learning strategy of Chinese learners. However, it should be distinguished from rote learning, a stereotyped image many Western researchers have mistakenly given to the Chinese strategy (Biggs, 1996b; Marton *et al.*, 1996). Research (e.g. Biggs, 1996a, 1996b; Goh & Kwah, 1997) has shown that Chinese learners do not learn by rote more often than Western students. The way memorisation is carried out and used by Chinese learners suggests that it is part of a deep approach to learning. Students are not encouraged to engage in mechanical memorisation. Instead, they are encouraged to memorise with understanding; that is, to memorise what is understood and to understand through memorisation (Lee, 1996; Marton *et al.*, 1996). Because of this emphasis on memorisation with understanding, mental activeness rather than verbal activeness is valued (Jin & Cortazzi, 1995). Successful learning and understanding are believed to be attainable through active mental analysis, questioning, discriminating, and reflection; hence the dictum, 'learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous'. Finally, learning is never considered complete until full mastery is achieved. No approximation to knowledge or pretension to understanding is tolerated. This is why Confucius exhorted his disciples to 'say yes, when you know; say no when you don't' (*zhizhi wei zhizhi buzhi wei buzhi*). It can be argued that the four M's of learning are largely incompatible with CLT practices that take a holistic approach to learning, downplay the importance of memorisation, stress verbal interaction (often at the expense of

inner activity), and encourage speculation (e.g. guesswork) and tolerance for ambiguity.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows that CLT and the traditional Chinese culture of learning are in potential conflict in several important respects. They embody different, even opposing, philosophies about the nature of teaching and learning (e.g. the interactive model of CLT vs. the Chinese epistemic model). They have largely contrary assumptions about the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students (e.g. learner-centredness vs. teacher dominance/control). They encourage different learning strategies (e.g. verbal activeness vs. mental activeness). They reward different qualities in students (e.g. independence and individuality in CLT and receptiveness and conformity in the Chinese culture of learning) and value different classroom etiquettes. Given these fundamental sociocultural differences, it is counterproductive to attempt to sweep away traditional practices and implant CLT in their place. After all, a methodology is only effective to the extent that teachers and students are willing to accept and implement it with good faith, and whether it is accepted or not is largely determined by the set of values and beliefs that these teachers and students have been socialised into. It is dangerous for educational policymakers to take an 'autonomous' attitude, as opposed to an 'ideological' one, to pedagogical innovation and to succumb to shifts in intellectual fashions. An 'autonomous' attitude assumes that a pedagogy which is effective and appropriate in one social and cultural context also works in a different one, whereas an 'ideological' attitude recognises culturally embedded diversity and rejects the notion of universally appropriate ways of teaching and learning (Coleman, 1996; Hinkel, 1999). The frequently observed resistance around the world to pedagogies of foreign origin provides justification for adopting an 'ideological' approach. As Coleman (1996: 11) argues, 'innovations which are intended to facilitate learning may be so disturbing for those affected by them – so threatening to their belief systems – that hostility is aroused and learning becomes impossible'.

That some tenets and practices subscribed by CLT are incompatible with those found in the Chinese culture of learning, however, does not mean that CLT has nothing to offer to ELT in the PRC. It certainly makes sense to look at those aspects of CLT which are not inimical to the Chinese culture of learning and to try to exploit them in the Chinese context without drastically changing the classroom etiquette. In this regard, the domestication of audiolingualism has set a pertinent example. Although audiolingualism, like CLT, was a pedagogy of foreign origin, some of its practices (e.g. emphasis on accuracy as a desired outcome, on drilling and memorisation as useful learning strategies, on strict control by the teacher over the learning process, and on structure-based syllabus design) were successfully integrated into the traditional Chinese approach because of their compatibility with the Chinese culture of learning. In the case of CLT, there are also a number of features which are not at odds with the Chinese culture of learning. For example, some of the pedagogical practices encouraged in CLT, such as collaborative learning, cultivation of sociolinguistic competence, use of authentic teaching materials, and learning strategy training, are consonant

with the Chinese emphasis on collective orientations, socially appropriate behaviours, and concern for the right way of doing things. They can be integrated into the prevalent Chinese pedagogical practices without causing disturbance or threatening the deep-rooted belief systems. For this kind of beneficial integration to happen, it is necessary to conduct an audit of the sociocultural factors at work in the language classroom and the philosophical assumptions underlying a pedagogical innovation of foreign origin so as to identify culturally proper points of interface. In the final analysis, it is important for educational policymakers and teachers to take a cautiously eclectic approach and make well-informed pedagogical choices that are grounded in an understanding of sociocultural influences.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. In 1986, a survey study was conducted, under the auspices of the State Education Commission, on students from 139 secondary schools in 15 provinces. The study revealed that the general level of English proficiency was rather low, although the students surveyed had studied English for years. A great majority of the students had only some fragmentary knowledge of English, could recognise about 1800 words, and were very weak in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
2. See Bachman (1990) and Skehan (1998) for further development of the notion of communicative competence.
3. In Chinese culture, ability is not considered to be an immutable attribute as it is in Western cultures (Cheng, 1990). 'Ability is perceived as more controllable and can be increased through hard work' (Salili, 1996: 100). Such a conception works against learned helplessness, which often attributes failure to a lack of innate ability.

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