The Pedagogy of a Tertiary-level EFL Teacher in the PRC

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ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the implemented English language pedagogy at schools in the People's Republic of China in view of the little research that has been done in this area (Zheng & Adamson, 2003). Two questions that have been raised in the literature on English language teachers and learners in China are: “Is there a gap between the officially promoted communicative approach and the actual pedagogy of EFL teachers in Chinese classrooms?” and “Are Chinese students receptive towards classroom practices informed by the communicative approach?” (Barnaby and Sun, 1989; Ellis, 1996; Leng, 1997; Ng & Tang, 1997; Rao, 1996; Yu 2001). This paper reports an in-depth, descriptive study of a PRC EFL teacher through lesson observations and interviews at a key university in an inland province; and a concurrent investigation of student attitudes (through interviews) towards this teacher’s pedagogy, in an attempt to answer the abovementioned questions. The findings challenge the stereotypical views of the Chinese English language teacher and learner. While not entirely subscribing to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the teacher’s pedagogy came across as a principled approach based on the teacher’s personal beliefs about the teaching and learning of the English language, her personal experiences as both student and teacher and her perception of students’ needs. The students, on the other hand, expressed desire for less teacher talk and more opportunities for student participation, contrary to the common perception of the Chinese learner.

Introduction

While CLT as a teaching methodology in ELT has been unequivocally promoted by China’s education authorities in recent years (Hu, 2002b, 2005; Zheng & Adamson, 2003) and a continual debate as to its necessity, appropriateness and effectiveness has also been taking place in academic circles (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2002a; Li, 1984; Rao, 1996), there has been concurrently “very little research on the implemented English language pedagogy in schools in the PRC” (Zheng & Adamson, 2003, p. 324). Furthermore, while acknowledging that CLT has been similarly promoted in various Asian countries in an attempt to improve the effectiveness of classroom teaching, researchers have also highlighted that “there is almost invariably a gap between policy imperatives and classroom realities” (Hu, 2005, p. 636).

This paper seeks to contribute to a greater understanding of the implemented English language pedagogy in the People’s Republic of China, by exploring the pedagogy of an English language teacher at a key university in an inland province through lesson observations and interviews. The paper also investigates student attitude towards this teacher’s pedagogy (through interviews) and CLT and non-CLT instructional practices (through a questionnaire). Zheng and Adamson’s study (2003) sought to give us a clearer picture of how an English language teacher in a secondary
school in China “mediates the tensions between his own beliefs and practice... and those of the promoted methods” (p. 324). In a similar vein, this study seeks to inform us on how English language teachers in China conduct lessons in reality, but unlike the Zheng and Adamson study, the study reported in this paper was conducted in a capital city of an inland province, that is to say, it was not carried out in a coastal and/or relatively developed region.

In a study by Hu (2003), two versions of CLT are identified in the more developed regions in China such as the coastal areas and the capital cities of the inland provinces. The first is a “weak” version whereby communicative elements (such as opportunities for students to use the target language in real communication or in problem-solving) are incorporated into a more traditional framework of “presentation-practice-production” or “a predominantly structure-based syllabus”. By contrast, the second is a “strong” version in the form of Content-Based English Instruction (CBEI), where the teaching and learning of English is integrated in the instruction of non-language subjects (p. 312-313). This paper reports a study which seeks to investigate which “version”, if any, is found in this classroom located in an urban centre in an inland province. Unlike the Zheng and Adamson (2003) study, this study offers another dimension, namely, that of the students’ perspective on the teacher’s pedagogy. The aim of this investigation was to determine to what extent students themselves, and not just teachers, were prepared for the use of CLT approaches in the English classroom in China, as promoted by the authorities.

The research questions which this study sought to answer were: “Is there a gap between the officially promoted communicative approach and the actual pedagogy of EFL teachers in Chinese classrooms?” and “Are Chinese students receptive towards classroom practices informed by the communicative approach?” Both these questions have been raised in the literature on English language teachers and learners in China (Ellis, 1996; Leng, 1997; Ng & Tang, 1997; Rao, 1996; Yu, 2001).

**Method**

**Research framework**

The term “pedagogy”, as used in this paper, is defined as the teacher’s personal beliefs about the teaching and learning of the English language translated into classroom practices observable through lesson observation and elicited and elucidated through focus interviews. This is a definition derived from the notions of the theory of teaching and learning, design of teaching and learning activities and the execution of teaching and learning activities as reflected in the terms “approach”, “design” and “procedure” in the model for the description and analysis of methods presented in Richards and Rodgers (2001). In line with this model, the data collected from the study were examined from the point of view of approach, design and procedure, though it was not assumed that the investigation would necessarily yield a picture of a coherent “method”. The aim of the investigation was to determine the extent to which the CLT approach had been incorporated into the lessons, and if so, how the students responded to the approach.

A total of 4.5 hours of lessons were observed and videotaped for analysis. Detailed notes were also taken during lesson observations. A total of one and a half hours of interviews with the teacher were conducted in English while two hours and 40 minutes of interviews were conducted mainly in English with 16 students (out of a class size of 50). These students were volunteers who responded to the invitation to participate in the study. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively, to see if there were emergent/recurrent themes which would reflect the emphases and/or strengths/weaknesses in the teacher’s pedagogy. Students were asked open-ended questions such as: “What do you enjoy most about this teacher’s lessons?”, “What activities have you found most helpful?” and “What suggestions for improvement do you have for your teacher?” Students were told they could express their views in Chinese at any point in the interviews should they find it more conducive to a freer expression of their views. They were also assured of anonymity in the reporting and discussion of the data.
In addition, a survey containing 18 items, ten describing CLT instructional practices and eight, non-CLT instructional practices, was administered to 48 students (two out of the class of 50 were absent on the day of the survey). Students were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale of 1 to 5, their attitudes towards these instructional practices, with “1” indicating that “they do not like it at all” and “5”, that “they like it very much.” This survey seeks to investigate students’ readiness for the use of CLT instructional practices in the classroom, regardless of whether the CLT approach had been adopted by their teacher.

Participants

The teacher, Yin (a pseudonym), was a relatively young member (less than five years of teaching experience) of the faculty of a key university in a capital city of an inland province of the People’s Republic of China. She was, however, distinguished by good student feedback (the highest score achieved, with 98.86 out of 100 in 2006).

The class observed in this study comprised 50 students in a “bilingual class”—a class offered to students who had good enough scores to qualify for a course that offered more instruction in English and also oral English classes conducted by foreign teachers. The 16 students who attended the interview were volunteers.

Results: Findings from the lesson observations

Yin’s pedagogy

The impression one gets of Yin’s pedagogy as garnered from the six lessons observed is one in which the teacher is very much the central figure in the classroom but not without considerations of the students’ needs and learning goals. Her pedagogical approach bears some elements of the communicative method but cannot be described as adhering to CLT methodology in the strictest sense.

The following were the main features of Yin’s lessons:

- Teacher-fronted instruction: Teacher talk took up about 80% of class time, with the teacher clearly in control of the direction and pace of the lesson. She guided the classroom interaction with explanations of the text in terms of main ideas, structure and language items and called upon students to answer questions. Here is an example that came at the beginning of a lesson: “What does the title tell you about this passage? What comes to your mind? ...Can you come up with some adjectives to describe “friends”? Some students responded to the questions while seated, without raising their hands. It seemed the teacher was not expecting them to answer the questions as she proceeded to show a PowerPoint slide on a definition of a friend.)

- Use of open-ended questions: Twenty-two instances of open-ended questions were noted in the lessons observed. The predominance of such questions used during this reading comprehension class shows that the teacher believes in getting students involved through stimulating their thinking beyond surface questions of grammatical meaning. Some examples of such open-ended questions are: “By what qualities does Bill Porter get his work done?”, “What’s your idea about human nature?” and “Why do you think that Lenny went pale and hesitated...?”

- Focus on meaning rather than language: The focus seemed to be on the meaning and ideas in the text rather than the language difficult phrases were duly explained and some translation exercises were given but 70% of class time was spent on elucidating the meaning of the text and eliciting students’ response to the main message of the text. It may be said that the approach is literary, rather than the traditional grammar focus one would expect in EFL classes.
Little corrective feedback and focus on grammar: It follows from the previous point that there was little focus on corrective feedback and input on grammar. There were no grammar drills, parsing of sentences or analysis of grammatical structures.

Use of Chinese at selected points in the lesson: There were 16 instances of the use of Chinese during the six periods of lessons observed in giving instructions and in a translation exercise on expressions found in the texts. Chinese was used mainly for explanation of difficult expressions found in the texts, and minimally in comments on students’ presentations or responses. It was observed that its use served the purposes of clarification of meaning and identification with students, that is, as a means of establishing rapport with students. This was observed primarily in the teacher’s comments on students’ responses.

An example of the use of Chinese in explaining difficult phrases came in the form of a translation exercise. The teacher read out the Chinese equivalent of the following phrases from the text and asked the students to spot them in the text: “I think they must have small insight or great vanity” and “I should never have believed that he was capable of such an action.”

Communicative features: Three instances of pair work were observed. One instance of a role-play incorporated in the reading aloud of a dialogue in the text, and two instances of games one, a ranking activity and the other, a guessing activity. (Refer to Appendix 2 for details)

Use of multimedia: Both teacher and students did make use of PowerPoint slides—the students in the prepared presentations assigned to them, and the teacher, in presenting her own responses to questions posed or in introducing extraneous input for example, pictures of human cruelty in response to the theme of human nature in the text.

References to life or connections with life: Perhaps, the most salient feature of Yin’s pedagogy is the emphasis on the connections between the meaning of the text and real life that she sought to make, almost in every lesson. This can be seen in the open-ended questions she asked about the students’ responses to the text (e.g. “Would you like to have Burton as your friend?” or “What can you learn from Bill?”) and the extension activities in class or set as homework for example, “Read in depth and find the connection between this story and cruelty” or “Recall one challenge you have had and what you did to overcome it” (as homework). In an extension activity on the nature of human nature, students were asked to rank a list of forces of nurture in descending order in terms of their importance.

Results: Findings from interviews with Yin

The use of Chinese in the English classroom

“If you keep speaking in English, you will drive them crazy...” was Yin’s remark when asked about her use of Chinese in her English lessons.

If teacher-student interaction in English only is a mark of CLT practice, then the use of the L1 in the EFL classroom is reminiscent of traditional approaches like Grammar Translation. However, the use of Chinese in Yin’s classroom cannot be seen in such a simplistic light. For her, whether she should use Chinese in her classroom depends on student reaction. One key reason is “to draw back their attention” if they should be lost. Hence, its use arose from a very practical consideration of helping the student keep up with the lesson. This seems to make perfect sense with less able students who may be overwhelmed should one adhere strictly to the CLT dictum of communicating only in the target language in an attempt to immerse learners in the foreign language environment so as to promote acquisition.

When asked if she found it contradictory to use Chinese in an English class, she explained that she was operating out of the principle of the learner being “at the centre of the learning process” (one that seems more inclined towards the CLT approach than traditional approaches
like Grammar Translation) and so, it is necessary to use Chinese at some points in the lesson if the student is to learn. The two situations in which she would use the Chinese language are: when students are “lost” (that is, they are not able to keep up with the flow of linguistic input in the target language), and when “only the Chinese can convey the result” (that is, the language item is too difficult to be explained using the target language). This view is echoed in Rao (1996), who feels that explaining difficult phrases in the target language, which in this case, is English, can be very time-consuming and may even confuse students. As Larsen-Freeman (1986) puts it, “The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students’ native language” (p. 18).

She did elaborate that there had been “a shift in [her] teaching strategy” from using a lot of Chinese to using Chinese only at necessary points in her lessons. She recognized that though her lessons could be very “lively” when conducted with the former strategy, the students need more exposure to English and an English environment if they are to improve in their competence in English.

What these remarks show us is a teacher who reflects on her teaching and is ready to make changes so as to meet students’ needs. Though on the surface, the use of Chinese in the English classroom may appear “outdated” and not in keeping with the aspirations of the CLT approach, the above comments from Yin clearly point to a principled decision in its use and not the result of any blind adherence to any teaching method.

In discussing reconciling the communicative approach and the traditional Chinese methods in the teaching of English, Rao (1996) highlighted that the use of students’ native language is challenged by the communicative approach because “the habits of the students’ native language are thought to interfere with the students’ attempt to master the target language” (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.47). However, it is clear, as shown in the case of Yin’s experience, that, in Rao’s words, “banishing the students’ native language from the classroom will not benefit Chinese English learners...especially during the early stages of English instruction” (p. 469).

**The focus of Yin’s ELT—language or culture?**

“The emphasis was on the language, grammar, spelling...vocabulary...” was Yin’s reply to my question on the focus of ELT when she was a student. She elaborated that the teachers then did not emphasize much on the “culture behind the language”, nor on understanding “the culture of the English-speaking world.”

She acknowledged that this background in her learning has influenced her approach in teaching, in that she now makes a deliberate attempt “to help them [the students] see beyond the language”, and point them to the culture. This emphasis on culture, as one of her guiding principles, is neatly captured in these words of hers: “to learn the word to know the world”. Interestingly, the influence here is one of a reaction against the perceived deficiency in the teaching approach which the teacher experienced as a student.

When asked what she considered to be the main focus of ELT now, she said it differed “according to different students”. By that, she meant that, for beginners, the focus should be on language, while for intermediate and advanced level students, there should be a shift from language to something more, that is, culture.

Evaluating the lessons observed, one could not find many references to the culture of the English-speaking world per se, but there were often references beyond the specific language items or specific meanings of the text to larger concerns which may be deemed “cultural” in a broad sense. For example, she discussed notions of friendship, human nature and the qualities that make an effective salesman—ideas related to the themes of the texts studied, but not directly related to the language of the text per se. Hence, one might say that she was trying to help the students “see beyond the language” (Yin’s words)

When asked whether she found her emphasis on “culture” helpful to her students at their level of proficiency, she acknowledged that, while the good students would benefit, perhaps the
weaker ones would not find it so helpful. She found that some of her students still made basic mistakes in their writing and admitted that “maybe this is something [she] had not addressed—basic command”. She agreed that there is a need to strike a balance between focus on language and focus on culture/ideas.

However, having acknowledged that some of the students, specifically the weaker ones, may not have found her approach that helpful, she explained that the fact that there was no pressure to complete the syllabus in any way, justified her approach which put emphasis on culture. (Her students were from the Bilingual class which admitted students who were stronger in English than the average students and most students in her university had proficiency levels higher than the requirements of the Band 4 CET exam, which college students in China take.)

**Yin’s understanding of the term “CLT”**

Yin had heard of and read about the term ‘CLT’, and remarked that it is “one of the recommended ways of teaching”, but acknowledged that “[she] had not been fully trained in the teaching strategy”. She used the following terms to describe this method: the students are “the centre of the classroom” and “the focus of the teaching goal” while the teacher is the ‘facilitator’, whose job it is to come up with “activities to make sure students are involved in class ... to speak and think and experience English”. (Yin)

When asked if she had incorporated any activities that subscribe to this approach in her teaching, she listed the following: she often gave students “opportunities to speak”, both to her and to other students; she often asked many questions to make them think; she got them to do group/pair discussion, and presentations such as duty reports and team work presentations at the beginning of each class.

**“Duty report” and “team work” presentations**

When observing her class, I noticed that at the beginning of each class, a group of students would present either something that was related to the topic of the lesson for the day or a topic of their choice. At the interview, I asked Yin for the rationale behind these activities.

For the duty report, students were supposed to present something on Chinese culture or current affairs; while for the team work report, students presented something that was related to the topic of the lesson. The rationale of these two activities was “to give them [the students] more exposure to English”, “more chance to speak in public” and “to disseminate Chinese culture” (Yin). The presentations also required the use of the multimedia, which gave them an opportunity to get in touch with modern technology. The teacher also required the rest of the class to become “critical listeners” to comment on the presentations, both in terms of the content and/or matters of language. She said the students would be more stimulated to listen since it was “not just you alone, teacher talking”. This would give the students “positive peer pressure” (Yin).

These out-of-class strategies that Yin put in place shows an awareness that effective learning involves what goes on beyond the classroom. One may say that she was playing the role of “facilitator” with the students, which was “the focus of the teaching goal”.

**Findings from interviews with students**

**Positive feedback on Yin’s lessons**

The majority of the interviewees liked the duty report they were assigned. They felt it helped build their confidence in speaking English, they could have “many different topics” and they could “share something that [they] like”.

Another strong point is her emphasis on vocabulary. Students praised her for pointing out “sparkling sentences” in the text, giving them “beautiful phrases”, “new expressions and exploring the background of words and word associations”. She also offered students ideas on how to improve their vocabulary. She was described as “very eager to help [them] to learn”.
Most of the interviewees (about two-thirds) agreed with her use of Chinese in class. They felt it helped them to understand better, especially abstract terms and cultural differences. They seemed to acknowledge its place in the class where necessary—in one interviewee’s words, it contributes to “better understanding of some expressions” (emphasis mine).

Perhaps, the strongest point of Yin’s pedagogy was her passionate manner and ability to go beyond the text to talk about culture and life. She was described as “energetic”, “full of knowledge”, and willing to share her own experiences, and how to learn English. She “doesn’t just talk about the passage”. “She has interest in culture, she will introduce something about culture to us so it’s interesting, but it is a little profound”. Her class was described as “a class full of questions”. It is clear that the interviewees did appreciate her breath of knowledge and that she was eager to take them beyond the text and extend their understanding to a deeper level. Obviously, her focus was more than just understanding the language and the students seemed agreeable to that.

**Suggestions for improvement for Yin**

*More opportunities for students to talk*

The most popular suggestion (from about two thirds of the interviewees) was for more opportunities for the students to talk. The teacher “talks for the most part of the class...maybe lack of interaction”. “Let us have more time for free talk”. “The class is rather silent...[she] should encourage students to talk more.” Some said that pair discussion was useful and “can be employed more”. Others suggested “more varied methods” such as games, holding a meeting, group work, songs and acting.

Some also expressed the desire for more informal interaction with the teacher. One said students liked “private speech” rather than “public speech”, for example, during break times (as concurred with by some others). This is understandable given the big size of most classes in China, and in this case, a size of fifty students. It is, however, not expected in the sense that it shows students who are not satisfied with the teacher-fronted instruction they have been used to, desiring a change that is perhaps more in line with CLT informed approaches.

*The issue of corrective feedback*

The interviewees seemed to agree that she did not give much corrective feedback. This is partly due to the fact that students do not get to talk much. While some were either satisfied with the status quo or not sure if more would help (“When we make mistakes, the teacher is not harsh”, “she doesn’t interrupt us ... after we have finished, she points out our mistakes.” “... a little bit more, but not too much that we become discouraged”, “... we don’t like to ‘lose face’”), others felt that more correction would help. (“I don’t mind that ... I think the more, the better”).

*The quotations in the previous three sections were taken from the transcripts of the student interviews.*

**Findings from the survey**

Due to the constraint of space, only items scoring more than 3 (on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating “the least preferred” and 5 indicating “the most preferred”) are reported in tables 1 and 2.

Though there are not many differences in the average scores between the CLT and non-CLT practices (3.21 vs 3.22 out of a maximum of 5), a closer look at the data surfaces certain student preferences, albeit not very strong ones.

**Readiness for CLT-informed practices**

There is clearly a desire for less teacher talk (the item, “Teacher talks most of the time” has a low score of 2.659) and more student involvement (Pair work has a score of 3.375 and group
work, 3.723). Students are also quite open to sustained input of the target language (“Teacher constantly introduces new words/phrases” has a score of 3.41). Interestingly, the strongest preference registered is for activities resembling real-world tasks (a score of 4.083). These are indeed very promising findings for teachers eager to incorporate more CLT-informed practices in their classrooms.

Appreciation for non-CLT practices

There is clearly still appreciation for non-CLT practices such as the judicious use of the mother tongue (“Teacher explains new words/phrases using some Chinese” has a score of 3.673) and explicit error correction (“Teacher corrects my errors after I have finished speaking” has a score of 3.979 and conversely, “Teacher seldom corrects my errors” has a low score of 2.085).

The teacher’s role

Regarding expectations about student-teacher interaction, there is an interesting tie between teacher-and-whole class interaction (3.729) and teacher-and-individual student interaction (3.895). This, taken together with the finding on desire for less teacher talk (“teacher talks most of the time” has a score of 2.659), and some resistance to the use of games (a low score of 2.77), seems to point to students’ conception of the teacher’s role as still central but not entirely subscribing to the traditional stance which accords supremacy to the teacher’s utterances alone. However, there is clearly a leaning towards students having a voice in the classroom though the idea of games in which the teacher’s role is clearly relegated to a less privileged position of games master is not quite acceptable.

Openness to free practice and risk-taking

While there is a fair degree of receptivity to the use of dialogues in the classroom, there is a slightly stronger preference for prepared/rehearsed production over free practice. (impromptu dialogues, 3.229, “reading out dialogues” has a score of 3.234; prepared dialogues done as homework, 3.791).
Discussion and conclusion

If the communicative approach is understood to be seen in pedagogical practices such as pair and group work, exclusive use of the target language, use of information gap/transfer activities often in the form of games, simulation and role-play activities, focus on meaning rather than language structures, class time dominated by student talk rather than teacher talk, peer feedback rather than error correction from the teacher only, risk-taking and free practice (Hu, 2005, p. 645; Johnson & Johnson, 1998, pp. 69-72; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 153-174), then Yin’s pedagogy seems to have few communicative features. It seems to bear a closer resemblance to the traditional teacher-centred classrooms that most of us think are characteristic of Chinese EFL classrooms.

However, a closer look at the data from both the lessons and the interviews with the teacher, shows that apart from the uncharacteristic focus on meaning (rather than language structures) and connections with real life and the teacher’s professed concerns about student needs, there is evidence of attempts to involve students more in class.

These attempts are seen in her educational activities which may be deemed leaning towards a CLT approach: the frequent use of open-ended questions (which, one may surmise, could well have stemmed from her major focus on meaning) and the out-of-class strategies such as the duty report and team work, which seek to both arouse student’s interest beyond language structures and prepare them for a heightened focus on and interest in the topic/theme of the lesson.

The discriminate use of Chinese rather than an outright rejection of its use in strict adherence to a CLT approach, may be seen as a tribute to the “good sense” of the teacher or in other words, an example of “principled pragmatism” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 30). This good sense has been borne out by more recent research which has shown the potential value of the use of L1 in the L2 classroom (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

The scant corrective feedback is rather uncharacteristic of our usual perception of the traditional Chinese classroom but unfortunately, this aspect was not explored during the interviews with the teacher and one could only remark that, while it is consistent with CLT-informed approaches which discourage explicit and direct corrective feedback, one is not sure if it was a deliberate choice on the part of the teacher to refrain from direct corrective feedback so as to encourage students to speak up.

While the teacher in the Zheng and Adamson study (2003) was constrained by the time available to cover the syllabus and the national matriculation examination, Yin was in a more enviable position of having students deemed competent enough to be able to manage the Band 4 national English examination for college students without too much drilling on the part of the teacher. With these circumstances, one could see that she chose to focus on meaning rather than language in her approach, in contrast to an approach which focuses on language structures which she was accustomed to as a student. This, one may say, is consistent with one of the tenets of the CLT approach which puts meaning above grammar for its own sake. However, in terms of classroom procedure, Yin had yet to adopt more CLT-informed practices such as pair and group discussion and games which require greater participation from students and yield more opportunities for students to express meaning. However, though there were not many instances of group/pair work, the instances in her lessons were rather successful in engaging the students’ attention.

One out of the two instances happened during the sixth lesson observed where students were asked to arrange forces of “nurture” in descending order of importance. This was an extension activity after discussing the theme of human nature and cruelty in the text. The students embarked on this pair activity with much enthusiasm, as could be seen especially in the lively class discussion which ensued as individual students presented their responses to the ranking activity. This activity was motivated by the teacher’s concern to raise students’ “understanding to a higher level”, rather than any conscious adherence to a CLT creed.

One interesting observation is that this rather lively section of the lesson came after a sustained period of about 20 minutes of teacher monologue in which the meaning of a section
of the text in question was explicated. This shows that teacher talk is not necessarily unhelpful as it seemed to have paved the way for a round of lively discussion. This episode also reminds us of the “deep learning approach” (Biggs, 1996) of Chinese learners where silence which takes place during teacher talk may not necessarily mean that students are not engaged or learning. Apparent passivity on the part of the students belies the thinking or reflection that could be happening at a deeper level.

These two instances of successful student engagement corroborate the finding on students’ desire for more opportunities for student talk and involvement in class, in the student interviews. There is definitely room for Yin and perhaps her colleagues, to allow students more time to talk and participate in class, which will be more in line with the promoted CLT approach. There is also evidence from the student interviews that they would welcome “more varied methods” such as games, holding a meeting, group work, songs and acting, which are more characteristic of the CLT approach. These findings were confirmed in the results in the survey which showed some readiness on the students’ part for CLT practices such as group/pair work, less teacher talk, and tasks resembling real-world tasks.

Yin’s professed focus on culture (rather than language) and the observed emphasis on meaning (rather than language structures) in her lessons are surprising and promising findings which point to teacher beliefs which are perhaps more resonant with the tenets of the CLT approach. However, one must bear in mind that the context here is of tertiary students of at least an intermediate level of proficiency and Yin herself did qualify that there is a need to strike a balance between focus on language and focus on culture/ideas as weaker students would not be able to benefit so much from such an approach. What this finding points towards is a possible direction for development that ELT at the higher educational levels in China may take: a greater focus on culture and meaning rather than grammar or language structures which will facilitate a deeper understanding of the target language. In fact, there are already some signs that a similar approach is being adopted on a small scale in this university where the study was conducted, in the form of CBEI (content-based English instruction) for some core subjects such as accounting and management. I say a “similar” approach as the focus here is on ESP (English for Specific Purposes) content areas rather than culture in general.

Yin’s focus on connections with real life, which is an attempt to show that the significance of what students are learning goes beyond the classroom, is another encouraging finding. It shows teacher beliefs that are resonant with philosophies of learning which deem knowledge to be of practical use, and not merely for its own sake. This seems contrary to Chinese/Confucian beliefs which place emphasis/value on knowledge for its own sake. According to Hu (2003), the most prominent feature of the traditional Chinese culture of learning is “the conceptualization of education more as a process of knowledge accumulation than as a practical process of knowledge construction and use” (p. 306).

Teo (2008), citing Dewey, in Outside in/inside out: Bridging the gap in literacy education, describes “productive pedagogy” as one where lessons are “motivated and impregnated with a sense of reality by being intermingled with the realities of everyday life”. He stressed the importance of teachers doing “linguistic and cultural bridge building” (p. 413) to help students see the connection between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in the real world. Students are led to see the practical value of what they learn in the classroom. Yin’s “dictum”, “to learn the word to know the world”, seems to be very much in line with this thinking. Her frequent attempts to point her students beyond the text to larger meanings in their own experience, as a means to raise students’ “understanding to a higher level”, are evidence of rather progressive teacher beliefs in the teaching of EFL in China.

In conclusion, one could say that Yin’s pedagogy bears promising signs of an approach which leans towards CLT practices though there could be a greater effort to incorporate communicative features in her pedagogy, especially since she holds beliefs that are in line with a CLT approach and there is evidence that students would welcome more CLT-informed practices in the classroom.
On the basis of the findings presented in this study, it seems Chinese students in this context are ready for more CLT-informed practices such as pair and group work, activities resembling real-world tasks and provision of more opportunities for students to talk. This is also supported by the positive results observed of the two instances of group activities/games used in Yin’s lessons. Secondly, as highlighted by Yin’s focus on culture rather than language, a possible direction for development that ELT at the higher educational levels in China may take is a greater focus on culture and meaning rather than grammar or language structures, so as to facilitate a deeper understanding of the target language.
References


Appendix A: A survey on students' attitudes towards instructional activities

Dear Student,
The following statements are descriptions of activities carried out in the Oral English class. Please indicate your preferences by circling the appropriate number:

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The teacher explains the passage sentence by sentence.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The teacher corrects my errors instantly, i.e. while I am talking.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The teacher explains new words/phrases using Chinese some of the time.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Students speak English only in class.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The teacher constantly introduces new words/phrases.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Students play games most of the time.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The teacher corrects my errors after I have finished speaking.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The teacher never explains new words/phrases in Chinese.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The teacher talks most of the time.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Students present prepared language performances (done as homework).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>The teacher seldom corrects my errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Students engage in pair work.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>The teacher interacts frequently with individual students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Students present impromptu dialogues (i.e. little preparation time given during class time).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Students engage in group work.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>The teacher interacts mainly with the class as a whole.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Students carry out activities resembling real-world tasks (e.g. assuming role of tourist guide in tourist guide-tourist dialogue or customer in customer-salesperson dialogue).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Students read aloud dialogues and texts.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

End of survey — 问卷结束
Appendix B: Two instances of games used in the lessons

A. Ranking activity
The activity was carried out as an extension activity to the reading comprehension passage which carries a theme on human weakness/nature. After showing a PPT slideshow on pictures of human cruelty taken from current Chinese newspapers, the teacher posed the question: “What is your idea about human nature? Are men born good or evil?” After a slight pause for reflection, she proceeded to give another PPT presentation on different viewpoints on the issue from Chinese philosophers such as Confucius and Xunzi. She highlighted the debate between nature and nurture and differing views. Subsequently, she asked the students to rank the following forces of nurture in descending order of importance and to discuss their answers with their group members: parenting, genes, family, schooling, peers, and socio-economic order. After the group work, a whole-class discussion was carried out.

B. Guessing activity
This activity was carried out after a character analysis of a key character in the comprehension passage covered in the lesson. The teacher began with some instructions on how to write a character sketch and then proceeded to give the students the task of writing a short description about a classmate in around 80 words. The activity was framed as a game. After writing, any student could read his/her description and let the rest of the class guess who the subject of the description was.