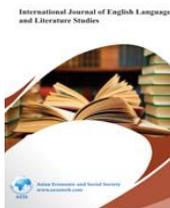




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AUDIOLINGUAL METHOD AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA: THE CASE OF CULTURAL DOMESTICATION AND RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Audiolingualism and Communicative Language Teaching are two pedagogies both of foreign origin, however, they have made drastically different impact on English Language Teaching in China. The paper explains from a cultural perspective why audiolingualism is painlessly integrated into traditional Chinese approach of English learning while Communicative Language Teaching seems to have encountered fierce resistance from Chinese teachers and students.

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Keywords: Audiolingualism, Communicative language teaching, Cultural domestication, Cultural resistance.

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Contribution/ Originality

This paper has demonstrated that why Audiolingualism and Communicative Language Teaching—two pedagogies both of foreign origin—have made starkly different impact on English Language Teaching in China.

1. INTRODUCTION

During World War II, in order to provide American soldiers with at least basic verbal communication skills in foreign languages, a method was created in the Army Specialised Training Program in which soldier students had to memorize useful dialogues as perfectly as possible, from the materials prepared by linguists. This method was then known as ‘Army method’ because of its birth in a military context. It is, in effect, the embryo of audiolingualism (ALM). Linguists insisted on the imitation and memorisation of basic conversational sentences as spoken by native speakers and the students were drilled until they could rattle off the dialogues with ease. The method heavily

depended on drills, repetition and substitution exercises, which were justified according to behaviorist theory. The behaviorist epistemology takes the view that language is a system of habits which can be taught and learned on a stimulus-response-reinforcement basis. Thus, imitation, repetition and memorisation naturally become the core ingredients of ALM as are indicated by the term ‘mimicry-memorisation’, a primary teaching technique adopted in this method. The students are expected to ‘*mimic* the dialogue and eventually *memorise* it’. The laws of language learning¹ underpinning ALM state that the more frequently and intensely a response is practiced, the longer it is remembered. Taking foreign language learning as basically a mechanical process of the formation and performance of habits (Brooks, 1964; Rivers, 1964), audiolingualists emphasized the importance of reinforcing the ‘habit’ through imitation, repetition and practice.

The Audiolingualist influence on Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) may have started in the early 1960s. It was documented that the English textbook series (English Book, 1961) contains a number of dialogues and significant amounts of oral practice, having features – superficially at least – akin to those of Audiolingualism, which was emerging internationally as a preferred second language pedagogy at the time (Adamson, 2004).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as a reaction to traditional practices in foreign language teaching including ALM, started in 1970s in Europe and became popular in the early 1980s. CLT proposes that meaning is primary and teaching should be centered on communicative functions, rather than merely linguistic knowledge and ability to manipulate structural patterns (Widdowson, 1990). Since the late 1980s there has been a massive top-down movement to reform ELT in China, an important element of which has been an effort to import CLT. However, 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 (Hu, 2002). On the contrary, there has been deep-down resistance to CLT among Chinese teachers and learners since its very introduction to China.

In this paper, I will conduct a thorough analysis of the different encounters of the two pedagogies in China from a cultural perspective. An attempt has been made to explore why audiolingualism is not inimical to the Chinese culture of learning while CLT seems to have encountered cultural resistance (Hu, 2002) although both approaches are of foreign origin.

2. AUDIOLINGUAL METHOD AND CHINESE CULTURE OF LEARNING

Recent research on ELT and ELL in China has reached the conclusion that traditional approaches including grammar-translation method and ALM are still dominant in many a classroom (Hu, 2001;2002;2005) and memorisation has remained among the most valued learning strategies among English learners (Hu, 2002; Gu, 2003; Gao, 2007; Jiang and Smith, 2009). The traditional approach to ELT in China is considered to be a ‘curious combination of the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism, which is characterised by systematic and detailed study of

¹ The two laws are ‘law of exercise’ and ‘law of intensity’ Lado (1964).

grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, *memorisation of structural patterns* and vocabulary, painstaking effort to *form good verbal habits*, and emphasis on written language, and a preference for literary classics' (Hu, 2002). Although the Chinese version of audolingualism (emphasis attached to written language and literary classics) is interestingly contrasted with the original Western version which was developed to enhance conversational proficiency, it is undoubtedly domesticated in a painless way in the Chinese culture of pedagogy (in contrast to the cultural resistance to CLT in China (Hu, 2002))

Interestingly, yet not surprisingly, the inhuman elements of ALM seem not to have caused a major problem or aroused resistance in ELT in China. Although convinced of the significance of memorising large amounts of language, audiolinguists realised that to memorise material in a foreign language is much more difficult than memorising it in the native one, therefore taking too much time and effort (Lado, 1964). This task is considered 'hopeless' (ibid) because it is understood that the task of memorisation usually 'requires hours of tiring work, and is not really an easy way out' (Sivell, 1980). However, a seemingly hopeless task is thought not impossible if enormous effort and time is invested in the context of the Chinese culture of learning where effort, determination, steadfastness of purpose, perseverance, and patience, rather than intelligence and ability, are generally viewed as the determinants of educational achievement (Biggs, 1996; Lee, 1996). The emphasis on effort² is recounted in many vivid Chinese sayings or folk stories. For example, 'A piece of iron can be ground into a needle as long as one perseveres in doing it' (*zi yao gong fu shen, tie bang mo cheng zeng*³) is a household aphorism still used to encourage children to strive their hardest. The story of 'Yugong yi san' (concerning a man called Yugong showed his disbelieving townfolk that it was possible to move a mountain if one persisted year after year on the project) was more often than not quoted in official slogans going more or less like 'We can achieve our goal of ... if we uphold the spirit of 'Yugong yi san''. Mottoes that portray the productive consequences of hard work include: 'The rock can be transformed into a gem only

² The emphasis on effort (as opposed to innate ability) is again derived from Confucian philosophy. 'Confucian was interested in above all in the moral perfectibility of mankind. He rejected categorisation of human beings as good or bad, and stressed the potential for improving moral conduct through the creation of favourable environmental conditions. His view was gradually extended to all aspects of human behaviour. Human beings were considered to be malleable, and like clay, subject to moulding by events of everyday life. Differences among individuals in innate abilities were recognised, but more important was the degree to which a person was willing to maximise these abilities through hard work. (Source: Stevenson and Stigler (1992).

³ The saying is derived from a famous folk story: Li Po, a poet who lived over a thousand years ago, was walking by a small stream and saw a white-haired old woman sitting beside a rock grinding a piece of iron. Perplexed, he asked her what she was doing. 'Making a needle,' she replied. This answer was even more perplexing, and Li Po asked her how a piece of iron could be ground into a needle. 'All you need is perseverance,' said the old woman. 'If you have a strong will and do not fear hardship, a piece of iron can be ground into a needle.' Li Po thought about her answer and became ashamed. He realised that someone like himself would never make progress if he failed to study hard, and from then on he was a diligent student. (source: Ridley, Godwin and Doolin (1971).

through daily polishing.’ A summary of the belief in hard work can be found in the writing of the Chinese philosopher Hsun Tzu:

Achievement consists of never giving up. ... If there is no dark and dogged will, there will be no shining accomplishment; if there is no dull and determined effort, there will be no brilliant achievement. (Quoted in [Watson \(1967\)](#))

The basic precept of the above quotes is that one has to be willing to pay a great deal of time and effort on study, even on apparently boring tasks if one aspires to high academic achievement. Thus, when it comes to foreign language learning, the involvement of tremendous time investment and arduous work are taken as an obligatory price paid for proficiency rather than a deficit inherent in a particular learning or teaching method.

In addition to being over-demanding on time and effort, a major vulnerability in ALM lies in its under-emphasis on getting meaning across. [Lado \(1964\)](#) admits that ‘[I]n most cases putting the meaning across is a minor part of teaching a dialogue’. This flaw is overcome in international models of CLT by proposing a ‘learn by using’ approach in which learners are encouraged to communicate in the target language from the very beginning ([Richards and Rodgers, 1986](#); [Brown, 2001](#)). However, this idea seems not to arouse the enthusiasm of Chinese English learners and teachers.

3. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CULTURE

The potential cultural root of their reluctance to embrace CLT and other meaning-oriented methods again derives from general Chinese educational culture. Learning has been traditionally viewed in China more as a process of accumulating knowledge and reading books than as a practical process of constructing and using knowledge for immediate purpose ([Yu, 1984](#); [Hu, 2002](#)). The accumulation of knowledge and the use of it are likened 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’ ([Yu, 1984](#)). That is say, the knowledge you have learned may not be of immediate use at the moment, but it is ready at your disposal when you have to use it at some point. The importance of accumulating knowledge is supported by the Chinese saying: ‘When it comes for you to use your knowledge, you will regret reading too little’ (*shu dao yong shi fang hen shao*). Though the importance of the application of knowledge is commonly recognised by Chinese learners ([Wang, 2001](#)), using knowledge is hardly thought to be a parallel process to accumulating knowledge; rather, this is a sequential process with the use of knowledge preceded by accumulation of knowledge. Moreover, it is considered that one is unlikely to be able to apply what one has already learned without a reasonable amount of absorption of knowledge involving a long period. Clearly, the conception of ‘learn to use’ does not fit very well with the theory of immediate need as the starting point in learning as is indicated by the principle of ‘learn by use’ in CLT.

If this cultural background explains why Chinese language learners are not daunted by effort-taking and time-consuming boring tasks, Western language teachers have always been perplexed by the fact that they are unable to convert the Chinese students to a communicative way of English learning which is 'humanistic in nature' (Hu, 2002). CLT prides itself in taking the drudgery out of the learning process and injecting elements of entertainment, such as various language games, so as to make language learning become a light-hearted and pleasant experience. Many Chinese learners, however, feel uncomfortable with this imported approach. Brought up in a context where learning is regarded as a serious undertaking which is least likely to be associated with light-heartedness, Chinese learners naturally 'tend to associate games and communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are sceptical of their use as learning tool' (Rao, 1996). This is attested by one of my previous students who commented: 'It seems to be fun in a classroom full of game-like activities, but you learn little compared to the traditional way of teaching'. It is not that Chinese students are genetically different from Western students in terms of being open to enjoyment and pleasure; rather, they are not convinced of the overriding importance of oral interaction in the classroom, especially, among a group of learners and in an entertaining way.

4. CONCLUSION

As is clear from the forgoing discussion, what are seen as serious problems associated with ALM approach to language learning or teaching from the Western point of view may not necessarily cause strong reactions or resistance among Chinese learners. Likewise, what makes intuitive sense to many language teaching specialists in the West is likely to encounter scepticism from learners and teachers in a different learning context. With this in mind, we may be in a better position to understand why ALM has been successfully incorporated into ELT in China while it fell from favour in the West classroom and why text memorisation in English classes can be arguably associated with ALM⁴ methodologically despite its indigenous origin in the traditional Chinese way of learning classics. This also explains why some Chinese English teachers thought that more humanistic Western approaches to English teaching, though admittedly dynamic and creative, are difficult to apply in Chinese cultural context: 'Chinese don't think in the way most Westerners think' (Burnaby and Sun, 1989). Indeed, a particular methodology, no matter how logical the underlying principles are, 'offers a potential but does not in itself guarantee that a given result will be obtained' (Tudor, 2001). Learning or teaching methods adopted by 'cultural Others' (Pennycook, 1996) are seen as deficient rather than different. It could be argued that this is a kind of cultural imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) as 'there is no reason to suppose that one culture of learning is superior to another' (Kennedy, 2002).

⁴ In investigating ELT practices in secondary-level classrooms in China, Hu (2005) categorises 'Memorization of dialogues & texts' into ALM.

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