Communicative and Task-Based Language Teaching in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Contents

Abstract

Communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) were introduced to Asia as an alternative to traditional methods to teaching second/foreign languages, such as the grammar-translation method. Since then, CLT and TBLT have grown in popularity and have been promoted as central components in curricula and syllabi in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region. In several studies, however, researchers have observed that CLT and TBLT are often not used as intended in Asian classrooms, and they have also identified a number of challenges and constraints that teachers face when implementing these pedagogies. More recently, various innovative strategies to implementing CLT/TBLT in Asian classrooms have been taken, including

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negotiating with local factors and adapting CLT/TBLT to work with existing methods. Such adaptations highlight the importance of contextualization when implementing CLT/TBLT.

Although CLT and TBLT have gradually gained wider acceptance in Asian classrooms, a few unsolved issues remain, such as (a) how to situate CLT/TBLT in highly exam-oriented educational systems and societies, (b) how to incorporate form-focused instruction in CLT/TBLT to meet the needs of the learners and to maximize learning outcomes, (c) and how best to support teachers in employing CLT/TBLT. The adaptations of CLT/TBLT in Asia also illustrate that there is no such thing as a universally best pedagogical method or approach across context and time, whether CLT, TBLT, or any other approach. This chapter concludes by suggesting future directions for research and pedagogy on CLT/TBLT in Asia. The findings confirm the importance of having a flexible approach to implementing CLT/TBLT in Asian contexts.

Keywords
Communicative language teaching (CLT) • Task-based language teaching (TBLT) • Task-based assessment • Technology • Asia-Pacific region

Introduction

Traditional, structure-based language teaching, such as grammar and translation methods, has faced repeated criticism for not being effective in the Asia-Pacific region. With the growing need for international communication, policy makers and educators in various Asian nations have recognized communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) as promising pedagogies for their citizens' second/foreign language learning and have promoted CLT/TBLT to teachers, often through top-down policies.

Despite policy intentions, however, the implementation of CLT/TBLT in Asia has faced a number of challenges. Specifically, in order to respond to stakeholders' needs, various modifications and adaptations have been made. Viewing such adaptation processes as a way of contextualizing these teaching approaches, rather than as inappropriate implementations of them, this chapter highlights the importance of contextualizing all pedagogical approaches, including CLT/TBLT, to meet local needs. The chapter also sheds light on unsolved challenges in the contextualization of CLT/TBLT in Asia and presents suggestions for future directions for CLT/TBLT implementation.

The majority of research papers on CLT/TBLT in the Asia-Pacific region have come from selected areas, such as China (including Hong Kong), Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Research from other areas in the region has been relatively limited. Therefore, the following discussion inevitably depends on the information from those areas where research has been conducted; more research from other areas

would be of great benefit to enhance our understanding of CLT/TBLT implementation in the region. Finally, the terms *Asia-Pacific region* and *Asia* are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Early Developments

The Initial Implementation Context of CLT and TBLT in the Asia-Pacific Region

CLT was introduced to Asia in the 1970s, followed thereafter by TBLT. The premise of CLT is to develop communicative competence through meaningful interactions, as opposed to the traditional methods, which primarily focus on language forms and structures. However, CLT is far from "a monolithic and uniform approach" (Ellis 2003, p. 28). From the outset, CLT has taken two broad forms: weak CLT and strong CLT. While both emphasize communication, they differ in important ways. Proponents of weak CLT say that language functions, which should be the primary target of language learning, can be identified and analyzed systematically and can be taught by incorporating communicative activities into syllabi and materials. In contrast, strong CLT, grounded in proposals such as Krashen and Terrell's (1983) natural approach, advocates that language acquisition is only possible through natural communication without any direct control by the teacher (Littlewood 2014).

The importance of communicative competence in a foreign language, English in particular, was repeatedly addressed among educators, business communities, and policy makers in Asia, but CLT did not gain wide recognition in the region until the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Soon thereafter CLT became a central component of curricula and syllabi in many nations in the region, including China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, and Vietnam (Nunan 2003). But CLT was often realized in the policies as "a new and unquestionable orthodoxy" (Littlewood 2014, p. 359), and such treatment was partially responsible for teachers' confusion about and resistance to it, as described below.

TBLT became popular in Asia in the late 1990s, and the term *tasks* has gradually replaced *communicative activities* in policy and educational documents since then. However, the relationship between CLT and TBLT is not totally clear. Some researchers consider TBLT to be "the latest realization of CLT" (Nunan 2003, p. 606), while others consider TBLT to be a post-method pedagogy not associated with any particular method (Kumaravadivelu 2006). As with CLT, TBLT is not a unitary pedagogy. The definition of *a task* itself varies among researchers, although all definitions share certain core features, such as focusing on meaning, having a clear communicative goal, and involving real-world language use (Skehan 1998). Also like CLT, TBLT has a weak version and a strong version. Weak TBLT (also referred to as *task-supported language teaching*) allows learners to use tasks as a means of analyzing language, whereas strong TBLT advocates subconscious learning only through tasks. Thus, in strong TBLT, the syllabus should be exclusively

composed of tasks. Reports indicate that the introduction of TBLT in Asia resulted in similar confusion and resistance among teachers as generated by the earlier introduction of CLT.

In sum, with globalization, many Asian countries became concerned about their citizens' insufficient communicative skills in English (and other second/foreign languages). The premise of CLT and TBLT – developing communicative competence through meaningful interaction – was perceived as a savior for their educational systems' stagnant approaches to foreign language education. Multiple views of CLT/TBLT (weak and strong versions) were introduced, usually in a top-down manner through policy changes and without sufficient teacher training.

Major Contributions

Highlighting the Importance of Contextualized Implementation

A number of studies have addressed the many challenges of implementing CLT in the Asia-Pacific region. Many of these studies involved surveys and interviews with stakeholders or classroom observations, and they described gaps in implementation between policy and actual practice. Ultimately, many so-called communicative activities introduced in classrooms deviated little from the traditional, form-focused, or audio-lingual methods they were meant to replace (see Butler 2011 for a list of such studies). These studies also identified the sources of difficulties in implementing CLT.

It is significant that these observers in Asia (a) questioned the implicit assumption that CLT should work for everybody irrespective of context and (b) highlighted the importance of context in any pedagogical implementation (Bax 2003; Littlewood 2014). Some researchers, such as Cameron (2002), further argued that skills and knowledge for effective communications promoted in CLT are based on a particular – and not necessarily universal – ideology of genres and styles of communication.

Researcher-identified constraints to implementing CLT in Asia can be largely classified into three types: (a) conceptual constraints, (b) classroom-level constraints, and (c) societal-institutional-level constraints (Butler 2011, pp. 39–43).

The conceptual constraints are twofold. The first stems from a conflict between the central principles of CLT and the traditional local values of teaching and learning in Asia. For example, it is a common argument that traditional Confucian notions of teaching and learning in Asia (e.g., the teacher as owner and provider of knowledge, and the learner as recipient of knowledge; valuing literacy over the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills) conflict with the practical, student-centered aspects of CLT. It is important to note, however, that this value-mismatched argument has been criticized for oversimplifying matters and ignoring the cultural diversity across contexts within Asia. The second set of conceptual constraints stem from teachers' and learners' so-called misunderstanding of CLT, such as their belief that CLT

concerns only oral communication, that explicit grammar teaching is not allowed in CLT, that the teacher's role is minimal in CLT, and that CLT is only realized through group or pair activities (Savignon 2005). In interpreting stakeholders' perceptions of CLT, however, we need to remember that CLT was introduced originally as an alternative to traditional instructional methods in Asia; as such, certain contrastive aspects of the existing approaches may have been overemphasized. Given that similar concerns have been addressed about TBLT (Ellis and Shintani 2013), it is likely that these stakeholders' perceptions of CLT/TBLT can be partially attributed to the multiple versions of CLT/TBLT (i.e., weak and strong versions of CLT/TBLT), coupled with insufficient teacher training on their use.

The second set of researcher-identified constraints – those at the classroom level – include a variety of contextual limitations associated with classroom teaching. For example, studies often indicate that teachers were not well trained to introduce communicative activities or tasks in class, nor were they given sufficient support to carry out CLT/TBLT. A lack of teaching materials and performance-based assessment tools aligned with instruction has been noted as well. In large classrooms, teachers often found it challenging to introduce interactive communicative activities and to ensure that everybody participated in them. Consequently, teachers had difficulty managing their classes in ways considered appropriate in their given cultural contexts. Jean's (2009) study, "Key issues in applying the communicative approach in Korea: Following up after 12 years of implementation," found that the major constraints perceived by Korean primary and secondary school teachers – large class sizes, lack of support for in-service and preservice teachers, and lack of materials for communicative activities – did not change between 1996 and 2008. These classroom-level constraints were persistent, at least in the Korean teachers' eyes, despite the fact that some of the contextual situations were improved (e.g., class sizes were reduced from 45–50 to 30–37 students per class, and more professional support was provided to teachers) during the 12 years.

As for constraints at the societal-institutional level, rigorous college examination systems prevailing in Asia were considered to be the most significant obstacle for implementing CLT/TBLT, particularly in secondary schools. Teachers and students may not have found CLT/TBLT to be the most efficient and effective means of preparing for the exams. Parallel to Jean's (2009) finding mentioned above, even though many Asian nations have started to include oral communicative assessments in their college entrance exams, researchers often failed to find intended positive washback effects (effects or impacts of exams) in actual classroom practice (e.g., Cheng et al. 2004; Gorsuch 2000). Limited opportunities to use the target language outside of the classroom also hinder implementing CLT/TBLT in places where English has been traditionally taught as a foreign language or in other foreign language teaching contexts. With respect to English, it is important to note that opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom increasingly vary by learners' socioeconomic status as well as by region, which may in turn influence stakeholders' motivation to use CLT/TBLT in the classroom.

Work in Progress

Recent Progress: Searching for Contextualized Adaptations

As TBLT has gained recognition in curriculum and language education policies in many parts of the Asia-Pacific region, a growing number of empirical studies have investigated how best to adapt it in context, rather than simply pointing out the challenges of implementing it. At first, the focus was on the post-secondary level, where teachers usually have greater autonomy in their instruction compared with primary and secondary school levels; but studies conducted at primary and secondary school levels have gradually grown in number as well. Since the late 2000s, in addition to individual journal articles, we have seen a few special issues featuring TBLT in Asia (e.g., *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 2006; *Asia Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2009) and edited books on TBLT that include empirical research from Asia (e.g., Shehadeh and Coombe 2012; Thomas and Reinders 2015). Additionally, a number of professional language teachers' associations in the Asia-Pacific region have created special interest groups for members to actively exchange TBLT experiences.

Recent research on TBLT in the Asia-Pacific region falls roughly into two types: studies on task designing (planning and task construction) and studies on task implementation. Although the task-designing studies are psycholinguistic in nature and primarily involve testing hypotheses concerning the relationships between task characteristics and conditions (e.g., task complexity and planning time) and students' performance (with respect to accuracy, complexity, fluency, and/or interaction), such laboratory studies should help teachers identify types of tasks that are most suitable for their instructional goals and their students' needs and thus serve as a foundation for designing curricula/syllabi and planning lessons.

Studies on task implementation, on the other hand, are often nonexperimental, classroom-based case studies and are primarily concerned with identifying factors that make the adaptation of TBLT possible in a given context. These studies tend to favor task-supported instruction (weak TBLT) over strong TBLT, and they indicate the importance of flexibility in TBLT planning and implementation that is sensitive to the social, cultural, and educational environment, instructional goals, and students' characteristics and needs. For example, Carless (2007), based on interviews with secondary school teachers in Hong Kong, identified three key elements for adapting TBLT: (a) allowing greater roles of form/grammar learning in tasks, (b) incorporating tasks while considering students' examination requirements, and (c) putting greater emphasis on reading and writing. Conciliation with locally accepted approaches (such as PPP, a method composed of presentation, practice, and production) was possible when doing so allowed teachers to take advantage of the strengths of different methods, instead of dismissing the existing ones completely. Similarly, a case study at a Thai university that analyzed a 4-year implementation of TBLT (Watson Todd 2006) revealed that the program made some major adaptations while implementing TBLT. The adaptations included (a) reducing the number of tasks that were employed in class, (b) allowing a role

for explicit grammar instruction, and (c) incorporating a summative examination as part of the assessment in the course. With these modifications, Watson Todd reported that the curriculum became the product of "a mixed methodology," instead of being "a pure version of TBLT" (p. 9).

Greater involvement of teachers, from planning tasks to assisting students during tasks, has also been suggested as a key factor for successfully adapting TBLT for Asian contexts. Various types of scaffolding and feedback techniques, as well as encouragement, have been suggested as ways for teachers to facilitate student performance (e.g., Shintani 2014). As exemplified in a Japanese university case study in Lingley (2006), when developing material in a certain context, teachers may need to redefine the notion of "authenticity" and modify original texts to make them accessible for their students. Teachers may also need to prepare form-focused pre-activities, such as explicit vocabulary instruction, so that students can engage in tasks meaningfully.

A number of studies also indicated that teachers' beliefs about CLT/TBLT, rather than actual contextual constraints, influenced their practice and their students' performance. For example, Iwashita and Li (2012) reported on a case study in a Chinese university where the teacher's positive attitude about TBLT made it possible to have frequent interaction and active student involvement despite an unfavorable condition for implementing TBLT (e.g., a large class and students' unfamiliarity with TBLT). In Nishino (2012), Japanese high school teachers' perceptions of students' needs and the teachers' confidence (self-efficacy) in conducting CLT directly influenced their classroom practice.

Individual teachers' pedagogical skills also appear to influence their TBLT practice greatly. Butler (2015) found that even though the "same" task was used in a task-based assessment for primary school students in China, individual teachers interacted with students and offered them feedback differently. Similarly, Chan (2012) discovered that there was substantial variability among Hong Kong primary school teachers' strategies for enacting TBLT in their classrooms; the researcher suggested that "what is most important in shaping learning in the TBLT classroom is not the task per se, but rather the interweaving of pedagogic strategies at various levels of complexity as teachers respond to students' needs in the immediacy of the classroom environment" (p. 187).

Problems and Difficulties

Although CLT and TBLT have gradually been adapted for use in the Asia-Pacific region, a few unsolved challenges remain. Major challenges include (a) how to situate TBLT in a highly exam-driven educational system, (b) how best to balance between forms and meaning in task design and implementation, and (c) how to assist teachers in implementing TBLT in a way that is responsive to their needs and constraints.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for implementing CLT/TBLT in Asia is figuring out how to negotiate the use of CLT/TBLT within highly exam-oriented

educational systems and societies. While it is critically important to have a close alignment between instruction and assessment, task-based assessment and communicative performance-based assessment have not yet been widely employed in the classroom in Asia. In many Asian nations, norm-referenced examinations have had a substantial impact on teaching and learning, and teachers and students – as well as parents – place a great deal of emphasis on such exams. In implementing CLT/TBLT, it is necessary to drastically change the system itself as well as people's attitudes about learning and assessment.

Many Asian nations have modified their exam systems in recent years. For example, several high-stakes exams, including college entrance examinations, now incorporate listening tests, although speaking tests are not yet common in such assessments. Researchers, however, often have failed to find the intended positive washback effects from these changes. It is suggested that multiple factors influence washback effects and that they do so in a complicated manner. Moreover, as mentioned already, teachers' perceptions about exams are often found to be more influential over their practice than actual exam-related pressures and constraints (Cheng et al. 2004).

Compared with research on pedagogy related to tasks (task design and implementation), task-based assessment (TBA) has been a relatively under-researched topic. In theory, as Long and Crookes (1992) suggested, TBA should be conducted "by way of task-based criterion-referenced tests" (p. 45). However, a number of issues need to be clarified, including how criteria should be determined (e.g., linguistic performance vs. task completion), how and by whom the task should be selected in order to best correspond to the criteria (e.g., selection based on constructs or work samples), and how and by whom learners' performances should be rated and validated. To make the last point more complicated, traditional psychometric notions of validity and reliability may not be applicable, depending on the purpose of the TBA (e.g., the extent to which the TBA is used for summative or formative purposes). We still have limited understanding of how best to use TBA as an *assessment for learning* and to provide meaningful feedback to students. One can expect that teachers should play significant roles in this process. However, if teachers are not sufficiently empowered in the assessment practice and decisions, top-down policies of CLT/TBLT would likely be ineffective (Butler 2011).

It is worth paying attention to a 2005 reform enacted in Hong Kong that made school-based assessment (SBA) part of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), a high-stakes examination at the end of secondary school. SBA, an in-class, task-based performance assessment, accounted for 15% of students' total English marks on the HKCEE. In SBA, teachers assessed their students against criteria, while adjusting the assessment tasks according to individual students' proficiency levels. Various concerns were raised at the initial stage of its implementation, including concerns related to fairness, increase of teachers' workload, and teachers' qualifications as assessors. However, after receiving substantial support, the teachers gained more confidence and control over SBA, and it appears to have gradually become entrenched in the English curriculum in Hong Kong (Davison and Hamp-Lyons 2010). While this is certainly a promising development,

some issues remain. For example, after examining the students' interactions during group discussion, Luk (2010) found that students made a "collective attempt to present a best impression of themselves as well as the whole group through ritualized, institutionalized, and colluded talk" (p. 46), and such behaviors resulted in inauthentic interactions. Luk's example nicely illustrates a difficulty when a task-based performance assessment is imposed on two contradicting roles, namely, a showcase of one's best performance and a means of authentic communication (Butler 2011).

The second challenge concerns when and how best to incorporate form-focused instruction in TBLT. As we have seen already, the desire for form-focused lessons is generally strong in Asia. Although most TBLT methodologists acknowledge that some sort of form-focused component needs to be incorporated in TBLT, they do not agree on the timing and strategies for doing so. It is suggested that the form-focused component is best suited to the post-task phase, but not to the pre-task and during-task phases, in order to avoid turning an opportunity for authentic communication into a predefined vocabulary and grammar exercise (Willis 1996). However, this recommendation often appears to be counterintuitive for teachers, especially those who are used to the PPP method. In Asia, suggested modifications of TBLT often include form-focused instruction at the pre-task phase due to students' needs and other institutional requirements (e.g., requirement to cover prescribed vocabulary and grammatical items in the curriculum). The question remains, however, if incorporating form-focused instruction or activities at the pre-task phase is indeed effective, as opposed to incorporating them at other phases. Ellis (2003) suggested that form-focused instruction can be introduced at any of the three phases. In addition to the question of timing, further questions concern which forms should be used and how the form-focused instruction should be carried out to maximize task effectiveness while keeping the communication authentic and meaningful. Unfortunately, we have very little empirical research to inform teachers on these matters.

The third challenge is how to support teachers in adapting CLT/TBLT to their respective contexts to maximize effectiveness. Even if teachers understand the basic principles of CLT/TBLT, the various constraints addressed above make it difficult for them to implement it. As we have seen already, teachers' attitudes toward CLT/TBLT and their pedagogical skills and strategies influence their practice greatly. What kind of support do teachers need in order to develop confidence and appropriate skills and strategies for employing CLT/TBLT? How should such support be delivered, and by whom? Top-down, policy-led implementations often have a limited effect, but we know little about how to achieve an optimal balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to assisting teachers.

Future Directions

Research on CLT/TBLT in Asia suggests a number of potential directions for better implementing these approaches in Asian contexts. Due to limited space, I focus on just two such directions: (a) adapting contextually appropriate and feasible

conceptualizations and strategies for CLT/TBLT and (b) widening the application of tasks both inside and outside of traditional language classrooms, including using technology in TBLT.

First, in searching for contextually appropriate and effective implementation, a more flexible approach to CLT/TBLT appears to be indispensable. As we have seen already, research has shown that, in top-down implementations of CLT/TBLT, teachers often did not implement CLT/TBLT as the policies intended. The "original" format was interpreted, modified, or changed by various stakeholders as they negotiated a number of contextual constraints. One could argue that the most current practice of CLT/TBLT in Asia can no longer even be characterized as CLT/TBLT. Instead of seeing this as a failure or an inappropriate implementation, however, we just might benefit from treating it as a natural process of making pedagogical approaches (including CLT/TBLT) workable in context. In this process, it would not be surprising to see variations in practice across contexts, and such practices will likely continue to evolve. To avoid sending a misleading message that there is a single effective methodology – and that every teacher should subscribe to it – Littlewood (2014) suggested that we should abandon the term CLT. Instead, he advocated *personalizing practice* in his model of "communication-oriented language teaching" (p. 358), in which teachers are allowed to use various means to achieve successful communication, based on their professional experiences, their students' needs, and the feasibility of the approach.

Second, we can start seeing that the application of tasks is expanding beyond traditional language classrooms. The use of tasks in content language integrated learning (CLIL) has been on the rise worldwide, including in Asia (e.g., García Mayo 2015). Among various advances, one of the most prominent is the use of technology in TBLT. Technology has gained attention both as a communicative means of tasks and as communicative targets in TBLT (e.g., Thomas and Reinders 2010). Expanding digital spaces makes it possible for learners to broaden their opportunities to receive input or to use the target language by interacting with others as well as with the computer. Various online and off-line functions in technology create greater options for designing and implementing tasks. Technology may also allow learners to select and engage in tasks according to their skill levels and interests (i.e., personalized TBLT), which is often difficult within a tight curriculum and in a crowded classroom. As technology permeates our daily lives as a major means of communication, technology-mediated exchanges provide a venue for authentic communication. Moreover, technology-mediated TBLT would open a door for deepening our understanding of the role of affective factors such as motivation. This is promising because the affective domains in TBLT have not been well investigated in past research. For example, Freiermuth and Huang (2012), after analyzing interactions between Japanese and Taiwanese college students during an online chat task, found that well-designed online task in which students were required to reach a consensus could increase their task motivation, namely, "willingness to communicate, task attractiveness, task innovativeness and the need to communicate in the target language" (p. 61). While technology-mediated TBLT may have the potential to overcome a number of constraints against CLT/TBLT in Asia, we still have a very limited

understanding of how best to use technology in TBLT. It would be of great interest to many practitioners to figure out how technology-mediated TBLT incorporates the elements of focus on form. We also know little about how teachers' roles in technology-mediated TBLT have changed as classrooms have become increasingly networked. Moreover, we need to better understand how to assist teachers in using technology for designing and implementing tasks in their classrooms. As Lai and Li (2011) rightly pointed out, technology and TBLT can make mutually beneficial contributions; technology can inform better learning in TBLT, and TBLT can help to improve the learning through technology.

Ultimately, the history of implementing CLT and TBLT in Asian contexts highlights the importance of contextualization. As Prabhu (1990) suggested several years ago, there is no universally best pedagogy across context and time. Instead, it is important to take flexible and personalized approaches to pedagogy.

Cross-References

► Task-Based Instruction and Teacher Training
► Task-Based Teaching and Learning: Pedagogical Implications

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