Questioning oral English as a curriculum goal

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Abstract

In English language classrooms across the globe, the goals and methods of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are firm policy priorities. CLT prioritises the language used by native speakers and makes oral language competence a primary goal. This paper reports on a study of English language teaching at three national universities in China where recent policy reforms have taken up CLT and prioritised listening and speaking over reading. This study investigates the attitudes of teachers and students towards the policy and their views on English language teaching. While generally supportive of the goal of improving oral language competence, concerns are raised about the policy in terms of the context in which the learning takes place and the kind of English young professionals need for their future work, concerns that are supported in the literature. The article argues that, in countries like China where English functions as a foreign language, written English needs to remain a priority for English education of future professionals who must participate in a global English context for the exchange of ideas about their work.

Keywords: teaching goal, oral English, written English, CLT, EFL

Introduction

In China, an English course offered to non-English majors at a tertiary level is called College English (CE). CE has been guided by official documents from the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) such as the *College English Syllabus* (CES) (MOE, 1999), from the 1980s-2004, and *College English Curriculum Requirements* (CECR) (MOE, 2004; 2007), from 2004 to the present.

As of 2003, there were about 50,000 Chinese English teachers teaching CE to an estimated 19,000,000 students (Wu, 2004). In recent years, however, CE has been criticised as 'Deaf and Dumb English', because 'CE students can neither speak English nor understand it when they hear the language spoken' (Zhang, 2002, p. 4).

To address this issue, Chinese policy makers launched the reform of CE teaching in 2002, as later explained by Zhang (2008), Director of the Department of Higher Education in the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), 'the purpose of the reform is to solve the problem of CE criticised as 'Deaf English' and 'Dumb English' for a long time in China' (p. 2). Consequently, the teaching goal has been shifted from a focus on reading to a focus on listening and speaking, as indicated in Table 1.

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Table 1. Policy shift in the primary goal of CE teaching

CES (1999)	CECR (2007)
College English aims to develop in students a relatively high level of competence in reading, an intermediate level of competence in listening, speaking, writing and translating, so that they could exchange information in English (MOE 1999, p. 1).	The objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively…(MOE 2007, p. 18).

The goal is actually geared to communicating with native speakers. For example, among other things, the requirements for speaking are stipulated as:

> Basic Requirements: …Can hold simple conversations with *native English-speakers* on everyday topics (MOE, 2007, p. 35).
> Intermediate Requirements: Can hold conversations in fairly fluent English with *native English-speakers* on familiar topics, maintain the conversation or discussion, and agree or disagree with the other party politely… (MOE, 2007, p. 38).
> Advanced Requirements: Can hold conversations on general or specialized topic with *native English-speakers* in fairly fluent and correct English, and effectively maintain the conversation or discussion… (MOE, 2007, p. 41)
> (my emphasis)

In such a context, the new teaching goal does not belong to Cook's (2007) internal goal evaluated against progress towards achieving the educational aims of the language curriculum itself, but his external goal with its target being actual language use outside classroom and with so-called communicative language teaching (CLT) which is evaluated against the achievement of linguistic competence of a native speaker.

While the internal goal may help to show students' progress as second/foreign language (L2) users, the external goal can only indicate how far away the students are from native speakers. Put another way, against native speaker norms L2 learning can be measured only as 'degrees of failure, not degrees of success' (Cook, 2007, p. 240). Thus, it is against native speakers' English that CE is described as 'deaf' and 'dumb'.

Actually, Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean governments have met similar problems in their English language education and have been 'faced with mounting criticisms of ineffective pedagogical practices' (Hu & McKay, 2012, p. 256). Although students in these countries are similar in their oral English, only in China is the term 'Deaf and Dumb English' used as a label of students' weakness in listening and speaking.

This article explores some of the problems with oral English as a focus for the education of future professionals in the East Asian context. It does this first by considering the literature on CLT that the new teaching goal entails, and then moves on to considering the perspectives of those 'on the ground', teaching and learning in Chinese university contexts.

Concerns with Communicative Language Teaching

From my perspective as a teacher who has taught English as a foreign language (EFL) for over 30 years, and now as a vice-dean in language faculty in a national university in China, I was aware of the very real difficulties with CLT-inspired approaches faced by teachers in my own context. These difficulties include dealing with large class sizes, teachers themselves often having low English proficiency, and the challenges of bridging between local cultures of learning and teaching and those required by CLT. However, I also knew that CLT was widely adopted at the policy level in non-English speaking countries, including China. I therefore decided to review the literature on CLT policy and teaching with a view to discovering in what ways it was being used in non-English speaking countries and whether or not the problems I was seeing were being experienced elsewhere.

The review concentrated on current journals on the teaching of English (e.g. ELT, Language and Education, Education Policy, Language Teaching, Language Teaching Research, Language, Culture and Curriculum, Journal of Pragmatics, TESOL Quarterly, and World Englishes) plus relevant handbooks and academic books on methodology in the field. First identification of suitable material used broad key words such as 'goal of teaching', 'language skills', 'written English', 'oral English' so that a corpus of texts was identified. More detailed reading then focused on CLT, communicative competence, native speaker norms, interaction, cultural differences, English speaking environment, class size, teachers' language proficiency, teaching methods, and so on.

For the purposes of this paper, the review provided here focuses on the main critiques of CLT that were identified. These have been divided into four broad categories: (1) Issues with context; (2) Pedagogical concerns; (3) Learning English for professional purposes; and 4) Human and material resource issues.

(1) Issues with context

'Since its inception in the 1970s, CLT has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practice around the world' (Richards, 2006, p. 1). However, CLT is not without its critics and problems. The blindness of the approach to its teaching context is frequently mentioned in literature.

Bax (2003, p. 278) criticises CLT as neglecting 'one crucial aspect of language pedagogy, namely the context in which that pedagogy takes place', for example, CLT does not fit the situation where teaching is examination-oriented, as it focuses on learning processes rather than learning outcomes and develops fluency at the cost of accuracy (Richards, 2006, p. 35).

To see how a language curriculum reform aiming at equipping learners with communicative competence interconnects with classroom practice in Singapore, Curdt-Christiansen and Silver (2013) conducted an observational study. Their findings note that while 'surface changes', such as material adaptation and classroom seating, were obvious 'throughout all classes', 'deeper changes' in terms of the use of teaching materials, teaching approaches, and teacher beliefs were 'less evident' (p. 258). They argue that how well an educational reform is implemented depends on 'the socio-educational context in which the classroom is situated' and 'the historical and institutional traditions that shape teachers' "cultural models"' (Curdt-Christiansen and Silver, 2013, p. 258). This is an example illustrating that 'methods have been preoccupied with their potential global reach', but 'have lacked an essential local touch' (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 165).

More importantly, CLT is blind to its context because of 'its standardized native speaker norms' (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57), which 'means L2 learning can only lead to different degrees of failure, not degrees of success' (Cook, 2007, p. 240). In the age of the globalisation of English, against the native speaker norms, CLT 'fails to reflect the lingua franca status of English', 'the universal spread of English and its increased use by non-native English speaking populations for participation in the global market' (Hanna, 2011, p. 743), and 'circumscribes both teacher and learner autonomy' and consequently becomes 'utopian, unrealistic, and constraining' (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57).

The approach may well be the wrong target for policy in contexts where English is not spoken as a first language. That is why Bax (2003) calls for the end of CLT and replacing it with a context approach, which takes context as the priority, approach as secondary, followed by language focus.

(2) Pedagogical concerns

A second area of criticism of CLT is in relation to pedagogy. Obsessed with the myth that best method 'can be used anywhere and everywhere' in a history of language teaching, '[w]e went on expedition after expedition searching for the best method' but in vain (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 164). One of the lessons that can be drawn from this is to take into consideration 'the complexity and diversity of language learning contexts' in teaching (Savignon, 2007, p. 218).

Pedagogically, the criteria for assessing communicativeness must be based on 'what it takes to be communicative in the context of the classroom itself, rather than in some outside context', for classroom is largely 'for pedagogical rather than social reasons' (Cullen, 1998, p. 181). In reality, communicativeness based on outside the classroom is 'a rarity' in teaching a target language as a foreign language (Kumaravadivelu, 1993, pp. 12-13).

There is evidence that CLT is resisted in classrooms 'in East Asia and elsewhere' (Littlewood, 2007, p. 247). For example, Hu (2002) documents how CLT is resisted in English classrooms in China as the result of its conflict with Chinese culture of learning, particularly in terms of the nature of learning and teaching and roles and responsibilities of teachers and students. The resistance from deep culture helps us understand why '[a]lthough many teachers claim to be followers of CLT, this is often a matter of paying lip-service' (Hu, 2002, p. 94). Consequently, the promotion and transplantation of the approach in Asia 'have met with only limited success' (Hu & McKay, 2012, p. 348) and 'the roles of teachers and learners remain much as they always were' (Zhang & Head, 2010, p. 3). More disappointingly, there is little evidence that CLT works more effectively than the traditional approach of presentation, practice and production (P-P-P) (Richards, 2006).

According to Bax (2003), methodology is only one of the factors in language education and, therefore, what should be taken into consideration first is not methodology but the whole context, including individuals, classroom culture, local culture and national culture. The history of language teaching has proved that there is no best method or approach (Prabhu, 1990) that 'works no matter what the context' (Bax, 2003, p. 278). CLT cannot be an exception. Language teaching has entered a post-method age, which means more recognition of the ability of teachers to develop their own methods which fit their own classrooms and contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

(3) Learning English for professional purposes

For non-English speaking countries, 'failure to include English language acquisition as a primary objective of schooling is tantamount to jeopardizing a child's future' in the globalisation of English (Hanna, 2011, p. 733). The specific context for teaching English that is the focus for this paper, is in the preparation of future professionals from non-English speaking countries to participate globally. This means that these students must be prepared to utilise English as an international language in communicating with colleagues in fields of specialisation such as agriculture, hydro-electricity, pharmacy, engineering, law, education and so on.

For the vast majority of students who are learning English in China or other Asian countries, their ultimate goal is not to become members of local communities in English speaking countries 'usually mediated through the spoken language', but to become members of international communities, which 'we have to qualify to belong to through the secondary socialisation of education and training, involving a heavy investment in the written language' (Widdowson, 1997, p. 143). Put another way, in contrast with the local national communities as primary, the international communities are secondary and are mediated through the written language. In this sense, CLT may not fit a tertiary education of future professionals from non-English speaking countries or regions where the goal of language teaching is not to reproduce native speakers but to produce L2 users (Cook, 2007) who are able to communicate with professionals by using varieties which 'tend to retain a written mode even when spoken' in the 'secondary international communities' characterised by 'professional and academic registers' (Widdowson, 1997). This is the reality of English as an international language for professionals worldwide. 'Even in this modern age of multimedia and high-tech environments, it is still the case that most of us rely on our reading ability in order to gain information or expand our knowledge' (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000), in particular, when our reliance on the Internet is, first of all, characterised by written language.

(4) Human and material resource issues

Implementing CLT has implications for resources. For example, it requires 'pair work and group work', materials 'authentic to native speakers of English' (Hiep, 2007, p. 196), the teacher's 'high level of proficiency' in English, teacher as 'co-communicator', 'facilitator', 'negotiator', and establishing 'a link between classroom activities and real-world tasks' (Hu, 2002, pp. 96-99).

In non-English speaking countries, a policy entailing CLT can be problematic when there is a lack of 'necessary resources' to use the approach, for example, due to large class sizes (Altinyelken, 2011; Chen & Goh, 2011; Chen & Tsai, 2012; Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Du, 2005), teachers' lack of language proficiency (Chen & Goh, 2011; Du, 2012; Li, 2003; Littlewoods, 2007), limited instructional time (Ishihara, 2009, Hu, 2002) or examination pressure (Hu, 2002; Huang, 2005; Kikuchi, 2009; Zheng, 2012). More importantly, the 'learn by using' in CLT does not fit in with the traditional 'learn to use' Chinese philosophy (Hu, 2002, p. 99).

Hiep (2007, p. 200) observes that 'teachers often encounter many difficulties' in Vietnam and classifies the hindrances to CLT into three categories: (1) 'traditional examinations', 'large class sizes' (constraints in system); (2) 'beliefs about teacher and student role' and 'good teaching' (constraints in culture), (3) 'students' low motivation' and weakness to take part in 'active learning practices', and 'teachers' limited expertise in creating communicative activities' (constraints in individuals).

Along with other constraints, some of these problems, were pointed out again by Wu, the Vice-Minister of the MOE, based on her recent investigation in 340 universities:

> large class sizes (over 40-80), heavy teaching workload (16-20 class periods/week), low academic qualifications (72% of teachers holding bachelor's degree), teachers' low language proficiency, lack of in-service training, and classrooms where teacher talk dominated and students seldom had opportunities to speak. (Wu, 2004)

This situation in China means it is disappointingly hard to meet the conditions to make CLT work. The policy of prioritising oral English is in contrast with Saville-Troike's (2006, pp. 135-137) argument that in teaching a foreign language it is more important to develop students' *academic competence* focusing on reading than *interpersonal competence* focusing on speaking.

As noted above, in the history of the teaching of CE in China, reading was prioritised as the teaching goal until 2004 when the new teaching goal started to take listening and speaking as the priority. At this point, nearly a decade into the new approach, it is timely to reflect on how well it is working. For this researcher it was important to ask, 'What do teachers and students think of the new teaching goal?' In the next section, I introduce a study designed to explore the participants' attitudes towards the new policy.

Investigating teachers' and students' attitudes to a policy based on oral competence

The conduct of the research is described, including context and participants, data collection and analysis. I then move on to discuss findings related to the goal of oral competence in English.

Context and participants

The research sites were three national universities: the first specialises in hydro-electricity, the second in agriculture, and the third in pharmacy. This specialisation is typical of the 72 national universities funded by the MOE. Students enter these universities at the same level according to their scores in university entrance examinations. In addition, CE teachers working in these three universities had similar qualifications. Thus, the three universities are potentially comparable with, and they may even be similar to, other national universities in China. Their selection for this study is in accordance with Patton's (2002, p. 236) critical sampling, in the expectation that what happens in these universities is also likely to happen in similar national universities in China.

CE in these three universities comprises two types of class: (1) Intensive Reading Class, and (2) Listening Class. While the Intensive Reading Class focuses on vocabulary items, structures, cultural background, and textual structuring, the Listening Class takes listening training as the priority. National tests -- CE Test Band 4 (CET4) and Band 6 (CET6) have an impact on teaching. These tests are held twice a year. Students will get a certificate when they pass a test, with Certificate of CET4 indicating that they have met the 'Basic Requirements', and Certificate of CET6 suggesting that they have met the 'Intermediate High Requirements' – their English is at a higher level. Both students and teachers pay much attention to these tests because certificates of CET4 & 6 are usually valued by employers.

In these three universities, 120 second-year students, 12 teachers and 3 language faculty deans volunteered to participate in my research. All teachers taught both intensive reading class and listening class, which means that students in the same class had the same teacher teaching both types of class.

Data collection and analysis

What is the key to the education of future professionals at a tertiary level, oral English or written one? What is going on in classrooms where oral competence is being foregrounded? What are the effects of this policy - how realistic and desirable is it? These are the issues explored in this study by using the interview question 'What do teachers and students think of the new teaching goal?' and its prompts. To avoid a linguistic barrier, the interviews were conducted in Chinese. While the teachers and deans were interviewed individually, the students were organised into 12 groups of 10 for group interviews.

I categorised the participants' responses using thematic analysis. The participants' responses were categorised into two basic groups: (a) those who were largely positive about the new teaching goal as one category; (b) those who were largely negative about the goal as another. After this, it was found that a number of participants' perceptions fell neither into a simple positive or negative dichotomy. For example some supported the goals of the policy, but questioned whether the goal could be implemented; some were against the goals, but believed that it was good to improve students' oral English. As a result, two further groups were categorised as 'For…, but…' and 'Against…, but…' to include those who were positive or negative about the policy, but qualified these views with significant alternative considerations.

Findings

Table 2 presents a global picture of the results of the study into the 135 participants' attitudes towards the new teaching goal.

Table 2. Grouping of 135 participants' attitudes

	Positive		**Negative**		**For…, but…**		**Against…, but…**		**Total**	
Teachers	33%	(4)	17%	(2)	42%	(5)	8%	(1)	100%	(12)
Students	47%	(56)	37%	(44)	16%	(20)			100%	(120)
Deans	33%	(1)			33%	(1)	33%	(1)	100%	(3)
Total	45%	(61)	34%	(46)	19%	(26)	1.5%	(2)	100%	(135)

Table 2 indicates participants' four different attitudes: (1) Positive about the policy; (2) Negative about the policy; (3) For the policy, but pessimistic about its implementation; and (4) Against the policy, but for the improving of listening and speaking. However, the participants provided different reasons under each of the four categories. Thus, interesting sub-categories emerged. To indicate the source of data in the extracts from the analysis which follow in this section, a T in brackets stands for Teacher, SS for students, SG for Students Group, and D for Dean.

Group 1: Positive about the policy

Under this 'for' attitude of 61 participants, four sub-categories emerge: (1) Language learning should begin with listening and speaking; (2) If you improve your listening and speaking, your reading and writing will naturally follow; (3) Without listening and speaking, one cannot communicate; and (4) Listening and speaking are valued by employers.

Group 2: Negative about the policy

Although the reasons provided by 34% of the participants against the policy were different, they all point to one thing: Reading should be the priority. The point was made from different angles: (1) The goal was beyond the learners' needs; (2) Reading was the source of learning; (3) Focus on listening and speaking would lead us to nothing.

Group 3: For the policy but pessimistic about its implementation

This category derived from 26 participants' perceptions is a little more complicated than the above two categories. It is neither 'for' nor 'against'. Those participants were in favour of the policy but lacking in confidence in its implementation because they thought the following problems as obstacles: (1) Large class sizes; (2) Students' lack of opportunities to speak; and (3) Teachers' low language proficiency.

Group 4: Against the policy, but for improving listening and speaking

This is the smallest category because it derives from only two informants: a dean and a teacher. On the one hand, they both perceived reading rather than listening and speaking as the priority, on the other hand, they believed that it was good to improve students' oral English.

Discussion

All responses summarised quantitatively in Table 2 were further analysed thematically to gain a better sense of the nuance of the participants' views about the policy. Four major themes emerged that are described below.

(1) Oral English as a social need

45% of the participants believed the policy priorities met important social needs and therefore supported it. There was strong support based on the belief that '[l]istening and speaking are valued by employers (10SS)' and that oral English goes beyond language skills and becomes an indicator of one's quality which functions decisively as to whether or not a student can find a good job.

The participants indicated that it was pressing to improve oral English, claiming that '[i]f we believe English is a means of communication, the priority should be listening and speaking' (T9). Also, they viewed oral English as the key to language learning, believing that '[i]f you have the abilities in listening and speaking, your abilities in reading and writing will naturally be improved' (6SS, SG9).

Some even believed that '[w]ithout listening and speaking, you cannot communicate' (D1) and that '[t]he ultimate purpose of learning language' was 'to be able to listen and speak rather than just to read and write' (10SS, SG7). In their eyes, communicating orally in English was the key.

As the policy prioritises listening and speaking, some participants thought that it 'follows the natural law of language learning' (10SS, SG1). This shows that there is strong sympathy for the intent and underlying logic of the policy by nearly half the participants.

(2) Concern with classroom and teaching realities

Reflecting on students' weakness in oral English, 19% of participants expressed their dislike of the classroom situation where students 'don't have opportunities to speak' (10SS, SG5) and 'spend much more time listening than speaking' (10SS, SG2). Why is that?

To improve oral English, students need time to speak, meaning that 'we need small classes' (T5). But the reality is just opposite: 'We have big classes' (T12), in which '[i]t's hard to practice [speaking]' (T2). As noted by T5,

> Look, there are around 80 students in class. So many students put up their hands [to
> answer my questions]… only a couple of students are given the chances to speak. I
> can see that students are rather disappointed (T5).

The participants thought it was hopeless to improve their oral English and arrived at the conclusion: '[C]lassroom doesn't help.… If you want to improve listening and speaking, you yourself have to practice after class' (10SS, SG5).

The biggest practical problem raised was teachers' low language proficiency. The policy is 'demanding to teachers' (T10) and 'challenges teachers' (D2), requiring that '[t]he teacher's spoken English should be an example for students' (T10). This 'requires too much [of teachers]', as explained by T11 who had been 'teaching English for many years': 'I'm afraid of talking with foreigners. If you ask me to have a talk with them over the telephone, I'm afraid too much. It's hard' (T11).

T11 was honest. Her English was relatively good among the CE teachers I knew, which indicates the seriousness of the problem. In my own experience, CE teachers seldom communicate with people in oral or written English.

(3) Written English for specific purposes

A significant minority, 34% of the participants, viewed reading as the most important based on their understandings of learning, social needs, and development of language skills.

Most who were negative about the policy saw the new teaching goal as 'beyond the reality' (T3). On the one hand, '[w]e do not have the environment to speak English and hear English spoken', '[w]ithout reading, we cannot learn' (10SS, SG8). On the other hand, some saw reading as more important in terms of the ultimate purpose of learning:

> What we need is to make use of things from the outside world for reference…To
> meet this need, we have to read reference materials from other countries rather than
> to speak to people in those countries. We need to equip ourselves with that ability
> through reading (4SS, SG3).

The key here was access to English for a specific need, such as learning in a specialised field. T1 believed that for her students 'to make use of English in their specialised areas' '[r]eading is the source' because '[l]istening and speaking result from the accumulation of vocabulary and structures in reading'. The participants expressed their opinion of needing to learn English for specific purposes (ESP). Their view fits the global context of English as an international language, which largely means the use of English by

people from different parts of the world in specific areas such as engineering, law, medicine, pharmacy, and ICT.

(4) Reading as learning in Chinese culture

Those with concerns about the policy were also influenced by the Chinese cultural view of learning as happening largely through reading rather than interaction:

> If we focus on listening and speaking, we'll learn nothing when class is over. What
> is improved? What will we have learnt? Nothing… (7SS, SG6).

This perhaps is one explanation for why CLT is resisted in China. As reported earlier, D3 prioritised the Intensive Reading Class over the Listening Class and T9 indicated that the problem in reading had to be solved – in both these cases their attitudes might also be influenced by their cultural respect for reading as the major means of learning, reflected in the following Chinese sayings in relation to learning: 'It is when you are using what you have learnt from books that you wish you have read more', 'To fly high, a bird flaps its wings first; To make progress, you read books first', 'To position yourself in a society, you have to learn; To learn, you have to read'; 'Reading a book, gaining your wit' (Haoshou, 2015)

Analysis of responses where participants expressed concerns about the policy suggests they saw it as unrealistic and unlikely to function as well as expected by the policy-makers. One respondent who was a Dean, offered a compromise perspective which goes as follows:

> Good [the policy]. But in terms of types of class, the Intensive Reading Class still
> plays a major role. We should still focus on reading. What we have to do is to make
> the Intensive Reading Class relatively interactive and integrate speaking into the
> Listening Class (D3).

The dean's view seems practical. Given the Chinese-speaking context in which English teaching takes place, '[l]istening and speaking only for the sake of listening and speaking would not work' (T1). Furthermore, the problems concerned the 'for…, but…' participants deeply were actually hindering the implementation of the policy. Additionally, compared with the Listening Class, to my best knowledge, it is true that 'the Intensive Reading Class still plays a major role' (D3). While still taking reading as the priority, D3 also emphasised oral English by making 'the Intensive Reading Class relatively interactive' and integrating 'speaking into the Listening Class'. D3's opinion can be seen as a compromise proposal.

Implications

The four themes described in the discussion can be summarised by saying that for the participants, oral English is the key criterion for judging a learner's capacity of communication but that classroom realities hinder the implementation of the teaching goal. Following on from this, some participants noted that there were specific needs for English, notably in specialised fields of work and study. The policy may conflict with the Chinese culture of teaching and learning, adding a further roadblock for the policy's likelihood of success. These insights lead to some important challenges and questions that face English language policy-makers in contexts such as China. The most important of these is the question of the relationship between the oral and written form in learning a second language and it is to this question I turn first.

The relationship between oral form and written form in learning a language

Although some participants held that oral English would benefit written English to such an extent that the improvement of oral English would lead to the improvement of their written English, it is hard to prove such a cause-effect relationship. In every culture, 'the inability to read and write is known as illiteracy' (Richards, Platt, J., & Platt, H., 2002, p. 270).). The fact that '[m]any fluent bilinguals around the world are illiterate in one or both of their languages' (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 137) suggests that oral form cannot naturally lead to written form at all either in L1 or L2 learning.

In the process of learning a mother tongue, learners are in a linguistic environment where they always hear the language spoken. As a result, they acquire listening and speaking long before they go to school and start to focus on reading and writing. In this sense, listening and speaking have nothing to do with schooling but constitutes the basis of reading and writing, even though the learning of written language later in school will polish oral language already acquired.

When it comes to L2 learning, it is totally different. At a macro level, learners do not develop any English skills until after they start school life. In such a situation, speaking usually follows reading. In other words, when learners become familiar with linguistic items through reading, they can practice using them orally. In the secondary socialisation of L2 education which is characterised by 'a heavy investment in the written language' (Widdowson, 1997, p. 143), oral forms normally develop from written forms not the other way round.

This means that oral English cannot be emphasised for the sake of oral English itself. Instead, it would be possible to improve oral English on the basis of the improving of written English.

The participants' views of the role of listening and speaking in communication can be classified into two versions. A strong version sees oral English as the only criterion for assessing a person's ability in communication, for those participants believed that '[w]ithout listening and speaking, you cannot communicate' (D1) and that '[t]he ultimate purpose of learning language' was 'to be able to listen and speak rather than just to read and write' (10SS, SG7). A weak version takes oral English as the primary criterion for communication: 'If we believe English is a means of communication, the priority should be listening and speaking' (T9).

These two versions have gone to the extreme because communication occurs 'either orally or in writing' (Savignon, 2007). 'Learning to read and write is a process of experiencing language for getting something done' (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997, p. 210). Note, there is even a *Written Communication* journal published by SAGE Publications (http://wcx.sagepub.com). Interestingly, written language is communicative when spoken language cannot be used. Cantonese and Mandarin, the two varieties of Chinese, are known as sounding like two different languages but sharing the same writing system. This makes it possible for all people who can read and write in Chinese to communicate with each other no matter whether they share the same spoken variety.

Taking account of classroom and teacher realities

The policy prioritising oral English means more student talk in class and requires teacher talk as input of high quality. However, the realities are incompatible with the teaching goal. Large class sizes, for example, 'about 80', prevented students from having opportunities to speak and made them feel hopeless

to improve their oral English. The teacher's low language proficiency made it impossible for students to have access to high quality input, not benefiting students' learning directly towards the goal.

The above problems are also reported by Wu (2004), the Vice-Minister of the MOE. As long as large class sizes and the teacher's low language proficiency are realities, it will be hard to improve teaching. Perhaps, it is those two issues that the reform should address.

Additionally, the policy ignores the reality of the linguistic environment in China where it is hard to hear English spoken. Also, some participants perceived reading as the most important in learning because Chinese culture tends to take reading as the equivalent of learning (Hu, 2002).

Teaching for students' future needs

For the vast majority of students who are learning English in China or other Asian countries, their ultimate goal is not to become members of local communities in English speaking countries 'usually mediated through the spoken language', but to qualify for members of international communities, for which they have to go 'through the secondary socialisation of education and training, involving a heavy investment in the written language' (Widdowson, 1997, p. 143).

In contrast with local communities defined as the first or primary, international communities are referred to as the secondary and are mediated through written language. The policy entailing CLT may not fit a tertiary education of future professionals from non-English speaking countries or regions where the goal of language teaching is not to reproduce native speakers but to produce L2 users (Cook, 2007), who, as Widdowson (1997) describes, are capable of communicating 'with like-minded people' all over the world by using 'professional and academic registers' which 'tend to retain a written mode even when spoken' (p. 143).

This is the reality of English as an international language for professionals worldwide. 'Even in this modern age of multimedia and high-tech environments', the majority of us still 'rely on our reading ability' to get information or more knowledge' (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 118), in particular, when our reliance on the Internet is, first of all, characterised by written language. Thus, most students' future work and learning is at least, if not more, dependent on written communication than the oral form, something that a focus on oral language overlooks.

Lacking in natural English speaking environment, classroom teaching needs to be based on written English supplemented by oral practice. In terms of students' English learning currently, to emphasise oral English for the sake of oral English is to treat the symptom but not the disease. When it comes to students' future needs, English education should be geared to their functioning as members of different international expert communities by communicating with their counterparts in English as 'an ingroup language' (Widdowson 1997, p. 144) which is heavily based on written English. The study suggests that there is not a strong awareness of the kinds of pedagogical or resource-based implications of having native speaker competence as a goal and argues that written English based on reading needs to remain the priority of foreign language education. Another way of saying this is that the goals of foreign language education should not forgo *academic competence* for the sake of *interpersonal competence* (Saville-Troike, 2006). For many of these future professionals, inter-individual communication will continue to be in academic forms of English, often written.

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