

# The Ecology of Communicative Language Teaching: Reflecting on the Singapore Experience

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# The Ecology of Communicative Language Teaching: Reflecting on the Singapore Experience

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the ecology of communicative language teaching (CLT) by reflecting on the Singapore experience. It reviews how CLT was conceptualized, advocated and implemented in stages/phases as reflected in the different syllabuses by the Ministry of Education, Singapore. In anchoring the discussion against a historical backdrop and examining the ecology and evolution of English language teaching in Singapore, it focuses on two English Language syllabuses published in 1991 and 2001 respectively. It illustrates the operational issues in reference to the two syllabuses, with a focus on the ecology of such pedagogical innovations and how the ecological nature of CLT is mirrored in the syllabuses. Highlighting issues such as mismatches between what the syllabus documents stipulate and what practitioners bring into English language classrooms and how success in implementation can be achieved when training is provided timely, it also discusses theory-practice connection and the integration issue that is most often debated in the teacher-education literature. It concludes with a discussion of possible implications of the Singapore CLT experience for ELT in China.

**Keywords:** *communicative language teaching (CLT); teacher-education; English Language syllabus; ecology of CLT; China; Singapore;*

## 1 Introduction

Discussions of English Language teaching, especially how to enhance the quality of English education in schools, have been common government discourse in Singapore. The recently formed Language Teaching Review Committees headed by the State Ministers is a convincing case in point. This is because English has played a vitally important role in Singapore's infrastructure, economic sustainability, racial harmony and national unity. It is also because of Singapore's vulnerability in many ways that the government has been responding adeptly to rapid tides of change. This spirit of adroitness is well-reflected in the Prime Minister, BG Lee Hsien Loong's recent National Day Message, delivered on 8 August 2006 in Singapore. He said:

Many years ago, when Singapore was just a fishing village, our forefathers came here in search of a better life. In 1965, after a period of communist and communal strife, independence was thrust upon us. Suddenly we were on our own. But we worked hard and built modern Singapore from scratch. Let us uphold this spirit of self reliance, this openness to change, and this determination to succeed, as we build a brighter future for all. (PM Lee Hsian Loong, National Day Message, August 8, 2006)

True to what he said, and especially insofar as language teaching is concerned, Singapore's success in education also depends on its agility in innovation and change. Over a short 41-year history, the government has published several English Language syllabuses. The previous ones were mainly following the trends of the time when grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods were prevalent. The recent two initiatives in innovation in English Language teaching in government primary and secondary schools reflect the ecological nature of ELT and are more relevant to this paper, so I would like to spend some time on them next. I first address the Singaporean bilingual context in which English Language teaching and learning take place. Throughout this paper, I will address ELT, particularly, CLT, in Singapore, in the spirit of ecological considerations and in the context of local cultures, local knowledge, local needs, and globalization.

## 2 The Bilingual Language Policy

Since its independence from the British colonial rule in 1959 and separation from the Federation of Malaya in 1965,<sup>1</sup> Singapore as a nation-state has undergone various changes in national language policy-making. In the early years, two main types of schools – English-medium schools and vernacular-medium

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<sup>1</sup> In 1981, the Literature Syllabus was known as the English Literature Syllabus. The English Literature or Literature in English Syllabus, as is later named, is a different document, because in Singapore as is the case in the United Kingdom, Literature is offered as a separate subject of its own entity in the secondary schools and junior colleges and is examined as "O" level and "A" level subjects on the Singapore-Cambridge Certificate in Education Examinations. Literature as an examination subject is relatively more challenging for many students in Singapore, and for practical and utilitarian reasons, the number of students who choose to take English Literature at the "O" and "A" levels is relatively small. Considering the nature of this paper and the comparatively distant relevance of literature to how the English Language curriculum is defined (i.e., English as a foreign language, or EFL, for short), I divorce myself deliberately from elaborating on it in detail here. Ang (2000), Gopinathan et al. (2004), Lim (2004), and Lin (2003) provide more detailed accounts of this period of history.

schools – used different syllabuses for English language teaching. It was only in the *1981 English Language Syllabus* did the government stipulate that English be offered as First Language in the curriculum and a bilingual policy was clearly expounded. This policy, known as a unique “bilingual education policy”, accords English a supreme position in society.

By this policy, children have to learn two languages as school subjects, English and one of the other vernacular languages—Chinese, Tamil, Malay—which are all given the official language status. However, because kindergarten education is not part of the compulsory education policy, the degree of English that Singaporean children acquire through nursery or kindergarten education varies tremendously. Some children might start learning English from very young, even before primary school, if their parents are speakers of English or are more economically capable of sending children to kindergartens where the quality of teachers of English is better. Other children attend most often kindergartens that are heavily subsidized by the government and conveniently located near their places of residence or the estates in which they live. At the primary school stage children learn and use both English and their mother tongues. All the school textbooks are written and taught in English, except their Mother Tongue and Civics and Moral Education courses. This bilingual language education policy necessitates a legitimacy of English as a language of prestige and usefulness in society when it comes to employment opportunities, educational successes and career advancement.

### 3 The English Language Syllabus in Singapore

As is commonly known, English language teaching in Singapore is a chameleon, with changes expected at any time and this occurs usually from the top. The national English language syllabus for primary and secondary schools in Singapore, which is revised periodically every 19 years, has been revised several times in its short history of 41 years of nation building. In this connection, English language teaching can be discussed in four main stages: 1957-1971; 1971-1981; 1981-1991; 1991-2001 (for detailed accounts, see Ang, 2000; Cheah, 2004; Chew, 2004; Gopinathan et al., 2004; Lim, 2004; Lin, 2003).

Ang (2000), Chew (2004), Lim (2004) and Lin (2003) summarize that the four stages are typically related to how the nation-state has developed over the years. Each of these stages had its own particular emphasis. The period of 1957-1971 was a period of critical importance after Singapore gained independence and the inner struggle for self-reliance and ideological clashes between maintaining the colonial language and keeping a national identity became more prominent. So, national survival was regarded as a top priority. The period 1971-1981 was one of major changes in English language teaching. According to Chew (2004), this period saw more attention paid to how English was taught as well as a marked increase in student enrollment in English-medium schools. More importantly, it was also a period when the government policy of bilingualism was officially implemented to mean the learning of English as well as one other official language of Singapore—Chinese for the Chinese, Tamil for the Indians or Bahasa Malayu for the Malays. The period 1981-1991 was the time when the *1981 English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 1981) and the *1991 English Language Syllabus* (CPD, 1991a, 1991b) were published. It was a period when the MOE was looking for the best methods.

As Chew (2004) points out, much influenced by the communicative language teaching movement during the time, the 1991 syllabus is much more innovative than its predecessors. It looks at language teaching in relation to language use. The degree of description is manifest, and the predominant features of structuralism are less apparent. Owing to the methodological reforms in the mid-1980s, this syllabus incorporated substantial amounts of key ideas of communicative language teaching and allowed teachers to select from several inventories and lists of language skills, communicative functions, grammar items and tasks and activities in the various chapters of the syllabus as well as the use of themes/topics to flesh out an integrated lesson sequence (Ang, 2000; Chew, 2004). Following the methodological leads in the field of language teaching, the syllabus explicates that teachers be regarded as facilitators rather than purely knowledge-givers (Lin, 2003).

Consistent with the communicative and functional-notional spirit in vogue at that time, it emphasized fluency rather than accuracy and function rather than form. Language was viewed as a system of meaning-making, though the importance of purpose, audience, context and culture in the acquisition of learning of language was not taken into full consideration. Grammar teaching was more or less inadequately dealt with by teachers despite inclusion of an entire chapter on grammar teaching in the syllabus and the consequence was that students did not have a good grasp of the grammar. One manifestation of poor grammar was the prevalence of Singlish, a stigmatized local besilect (Ho & Platt, 1993), or colloquial variety of English commonly used by students in or outside schools, and in connection to students' poor performance in English the media in Singapore has tremendously sensationalized this phenomenon.

The revised *English Language Syllabus* (CPD, 1991a, 1991b), implemented in the school system, logistically speaking, represents a breakaway from the traditional English curriculum which was described as structural as it was based principally on the learning of discrete items in English grammar in

a decontextualized way. The 1991 syllabus gives teachers greater flexibility in teaching the language and encourages a more holistic view of English learning, emphasizing the integration of the four language skills. Much of the teaching of the four skills is theme-based. However, problems emerged due to the flexibility given to the teachers. It appears that it was due to the flexibility that led to severe problems in language learning outcomes. Consequently, not only was grammar teaching marginalized but also the effective teaching of reading and writing was not achieved. Just as Shirley Lim (1995: 504-505) reports:

... there are serious problems related to the reading and writing ability of some of our students as well as the lack of systematic and effective teaching in reading and writing in some quarters ... This problem is reported to be more serious and less easily addressed than that of poor grammar.

It is important to note that the implementation of the 1991 syllabus was preceded by a large-scale project called REAP (Reading and English Acquisition Programme) in which new approaches and methods were tried out in schools and teachers were trained to use them. As an integrated book-based program, it was aimed at improving language learning, and fostering positive attitudes. In-service training therefore was part and parcel of successful implementation. In many ways, Brunei Darussalam's RELA project was patterned on Singapore's REAP, according to Ng (1994), who served as the internal consultant for Singapore's REAP and later as the principal consultant for Brunei's RELA. Ng and Sullivan (2001) report that during an extensive research study commissioned by the Ministry of Education of Singapore, REAP was introduced in 1985 to Year 1 classes in 30 primary schools. It involved elements of "Shared Book" and "Language Experience" approaches, suitably adapted to Singapore, and a "Book Flood" of high interest storybooks. Their findings show that REAP pupils consistently showed better performance in all language skills in Years 1-3, and the Singapore Ministry of Education resolved to extend the program to all schools in Singapore. Follow-up studies showed sustained effects, and the methodology is now integrated into the national syllabus (CPD, 1991a, 1991b). This sharing of experience between two ASEAN partners is worth noting here. The idea of book flood is also expressed in the 2001 syllabus in words such as "reading for understanding" and "reading for enjoyment" (MOE, 2001a, 2001b).

It seems that the "best-methods approach" did not work perfectly well for Singaporean students and the Ministry of Education. As an ecological approach to syllabus design and development, the syllabus design and development team at the Ministry of Education worked closely with external consultants including Beverly Deriwianka, one of the main Australians who propose the genre-based approach to literacy instruction (see e.g., Deriwianka, 1990, 1996). Given the issues in the *1991 English Language Syllabus* (CPD, 1991a, 1991b) described earlier, the team developed the *2001 English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001a, 2001b) as a response to such social phenomena, marking the beginning of the third stage, a stage where the genre-based approach to CLT is explicitly expounded.

The original intention of the 2001 syllabus was to rectify the situation of a certain degree of a lack of systematic teaching of grammar as well as to pacify the outcry from the general English-speaking public. It is in this new syllabus that integration and language in use in relation to meaning and function are fully expounded and "grammar in text types" is a prominent feature. To a great extent, the syllabus is a very good embodiment of the principles of what CLT is all about, especially in dispelling a common misconception that CLT is only concerned with oral language skills and that grammar is not a focus.

In the *2001 English Language Syllabus*, the CLT principles are represented in a text-based approach that draws heavily on genre theory (Deriwianka, 1996; Halliday, 1978, 1985; see also the recent work of Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). This approach to syllabus development agrees with what has been recently discussed in the language teaching literature regarding the conundrum of searching for the best methods which are non-existent, as rightly pointed out by scholars such as Kumaravadevelu (2006) and Widdowson (1990, 1998). It is evident that context is a defining factor whenever a methodology is promoted as "the best". What Singapore needs are not the best methods *per se* but rather culturally appropriate approaches that guide particular classroom procedures according to different levels and abilities of students. Given the uniqueness of Singapore as a small country whose sustained development depends very much on international partnership and collaboration, the CLT principles advocated in the 2001 syllabus are what the syllabus team thinks should be the desired outcomes needed by Singapore in a globalized knowledge-based economy. I present the various aspects of the new syllabus in detail below while addressing the ecology of CLT in Singapore.

#### **4 The Ecology of CLT in Singapore**

Given the importance of CLT in the ELT profession, I would like to examine the ecological nature of CLT practices in the light of what CLT entails, advocates, and discourages.

Richards (2005) highlights the 10 core assumptions underlying current CLT today in this way:

- 1) Second language learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication.

- 2) Effective classroom learning tasks and exercises provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, expand their language resources, notice how language is used, and take part in meaningful intrapersonal exchange.
- 3) Meaningful communication results from students processing content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting and engaging.
- 4) Communication is a holistic process that often calls upon the use of several language skills or modalities.
- 5) Language learning is facilitated both by activities that involve inductive or discovery learning of underlying rules of language use and organization, as well as by those involving language analysis and reflection.
- 6) Language learning is a gradual process that involves creative use of language and trial and error. Although errors are a normal product of learning the ultimate goal of learning is to be able to use the new language both accurately and fluently.
- 7) Learners develop their own routes to language learning, process at different rates, and have different needs and motivations for language learning.
- 8) Successful language learning involves the use of effective and communication strategies.
- 9) The role of the teacher in the language classroom is that of a facilitator, who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning.
- 10) The classroom is a community where learners learn through collaboration and sharing. (Richards, 2005: 25)

He further explains that the current practice of CLT draws on earlier traditions of CLT and is not completely divorced from traditional approaches (see also Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Savignon, 2004; Widdowson, 1978, 1990, 1998). Thus, CLT classroom activities can be organized to develop students' communicative competence by learning grammar in context, due to a need arising in a particular communicative task. Activities can also focus on the creation of the need for communication, interaction and negotiation of meaning. In such a CLT classroom, grammar learning can take place in inductive and deductive ways. Next, I examine how these core principles are reflected in the *2001 English Language Syllabus* in reference to the ecology that I have taken up in this paper.

As I see it, the ecology of CLT in Singapore is best expressed in the *English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001a), which showcases the orientation of the role that English plays in Singapore in accordance with what society needs as stated by the government. Users of English in Singapore have to compete for success in all spheres of development in a globalized marketplace, of which Singapore is an important part. The *2001 English Language Syllabus* is regarded by many as a historical document in that innovation abounds in reference to the variability of learner needs in different streams of learners. The text types identified are classified in such a way that they form the "communicative building blocks" (Richards, 2005) with different types of text having different communicative purposes and audiences. It is expected that Singapore students need this knowledge in order to perform in an English medium system. It is evident that the expectations of students in terms of communicative competence are higher than what is stated in the 1991 English language syllabus. The approach taken is one that adopts not just first language or second language instructional practices but "a principled blend of both", which will be further fine-tuned and implemented in the new syllabus to be adopted in 2009 (MOE, 2006: 11). It is evident that the linguistic philosophy and pedagogical principles are so explicitly stated that the ideas of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of Michael Halliday and associates are clearly borne out. The 2001 English Language Syllabus (MOE, 2001a) stipulates that the development of the 2001 syllabus has been influenced by the following insights into the nature of language (see also Ang, 2000; Lin, 2003):

Language is a system for making meaning; it is a means of communication and expression; language use is determined by purpose, audience, context, and culture; language has a grammar and linguistic structures and patterns, which can be used to create various discourse forms or text types depending on the linguistic choices made. Learners have to be taught how to make these linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture. (MOE, 2001a: 3)

The SFL ideas are eventually materialized through the use of genre theory, explicitly represented by text types. These text types are: 1) procedures, 2) explanations, 3) expositions, 4) narratives, 5) factual/historical recounts, 6) personal recounts, 7) information reports, 8) conversations and short functional texts.

Table 1 shows the definitions and typical functions of each text type (see Doyle et al., 2004 and MOE, 2001b, for details). Teaching and learning can be centered on these text types, as will be expounded in the sections below. Let us now take a look at some of the new features of the 2001 *English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001a) as reflected in the following four main aspects.

**Table 1:** Major Types of Text and Their Main Purposes and Audiences

Text type		Main purpose	Audience
Narratives		To entertain and please readers/listeners	Anyone who chooses a story to read or listen to the story
Recounts (Personal and factual/historical)	Personal recounts	To relates events, usually in a chronological order of what the writer personally sees or experiences	Close friends for personal recounts;
	Factual/historical recounts	To record specifics of an incident or event	Any interested reader or listener
Expositions		To persuade or convince people or to argue for or against a point	Voluntary readers or listeners
Explanations		To describe or explain how physical entities or phenomena objectively	People who need this knowledge
Information reports		To document and organize factual information such as news report or an announcement	People who need this information
Procedures		To direct readers or listeners to carry out a procedure correctly	People who need to know how to do something
Conversations and Short functional texts		To interact for socialization or academic discussion or to relay messages for transactional purposes	People interested in joining conversations on particular topics or for obtaining messages

#### 4.1 Contexts for Communication

Contexts in the syllabus refer to the “status and roles of participants in the discourse, the purpose of their communication, and the medium by which they communicate” (Doyle, Goh & Zhang, 2004: 45).

**Figure 2:** Contextual Components of Communication

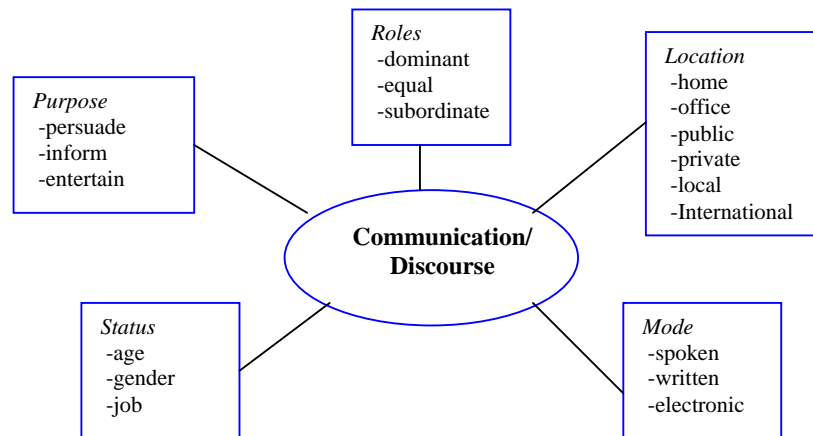


Figure 2, adapted from Doyle et al. (2004), explains such relationships as embodied in the 2001 *English Language Syllabus* which states that communication has to be appropriate as per culture, context, purpose and audience (MOE, 2001a: 4). The syllabus is based on the notion of context for communication and it is on this basis that the English language teachers are advised to conduct their English lessons. The contextual, cultural and other factors are duly given some attention, although not equally.

#### 4.2 Three Major Areas of Language Use

The three areas of language use refer to 1) Language for information, 2) Language for literary response and expression, and 3) Language for social interaction. These three major areas cover almost all the aspects pertaining to language teaching and learning, placing emphasis not only on language learning and teaching per se but also on how language is used in accordance with *purpose, audience, context and culture*, as mentioned above. Language learning and teaching are tied closely with language use in meaningful interactions, either *spoken* or *written* (emphasis added). This level of meaningful interaction is what Widdowson (1998) specifies in relation to pragmatic meaning of language use.

The syllabus focuses on appropriate and effective communication in internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture. In terms of

teaching, it is mandated that teachers should teach students how the English language system works, how its conventions can vary according to *purpose, audience, context and culture* (MOE, 2001a: 5), and how to apply this knowledge in speech and writing in both formal and informal situations. Note that the MOE does not emphasize speaking the British or American variety in terms of accent or intonation; rather, a very realistic aim, that of English as an international language, is set as the objective vis-à-vis effective and appropriate communication in English. This decision in documentation has taken into consideration popularly held views that English is no longer the language of UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand or Australia.

As the 2001 syllabus has a full view of the functions of language in social contexts, literacy skills are highlighted as part of the communicative competence with which students have to be equipped. The three-level guide (literal, inferential and evaluative comprehension) emphasizes critical reading and literary skills in relation to *purpose, audience, context and culture* as well. Language learning is not purely focusing on code-breaking and oral communication. This emphasis promotes cultivating learner interest in approaching text in that learners will have to read at the literal, interpretive/inferential and evaluative/critical levels.

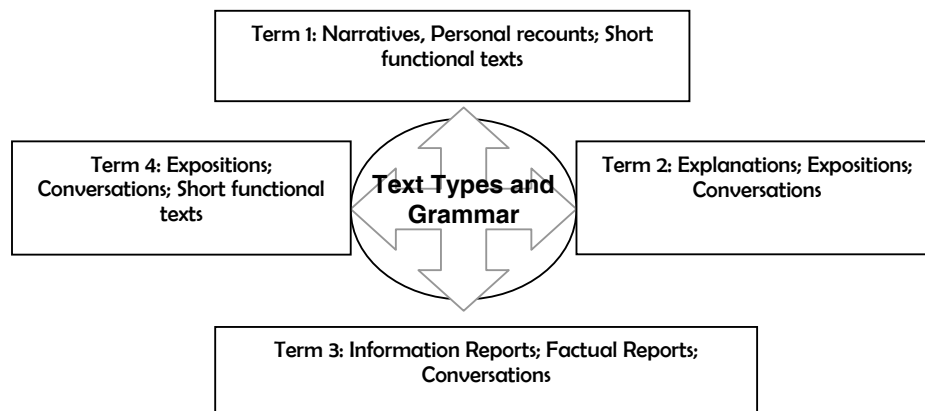
#### 4.3 Learning Outcomes: Text Types and Grammar

Focuses on language skills, strategies and attitudes are clearly stated in the syllabus. In this connection, grammar is given its due role that was once perceived by teachers as being neglected in the *1991 English Language Syllabus* (CPD, 1991a, 1991b). Two prominent features relating to language use in its social contexts are 1) Text types and 2) Grammar. However, different from the traditional notion of grammar teaching, the teaching of language, especially grammar, is realized through language use so that this part of the learning objectives does reflect the three areas of language use and cover a variety of resources, e.g., books, radio/TV programs, brochures, websites, postcards, instructional manuals, advertisements, etc. Use of “community texts” (Luke et al., 1994) is promulgated. In terms of grammar teaching, the syllabus mandates that grammar need be taught and it also illustrates how grammatical features and lexical items can be taught in relation to different text types in the context of reading, writing and oral communication. In other words, grammar has to be taught in use and in communication.

#### 4.4 Language Learning and Teaching Principles

In order to implement the new syllabus successfully, the MOE has published guides that give concrete examples to show how different concepts are represented or expressed in lesson plans. Four skill areas—reading, writing, oral communication, and grammar—are specifically demonstrated to the users, i.e., teachers, of the various *Guides to the English Language Syllabus* (e.g., MOE, 2001b). Learner-centeredness dominates the syllabus to a great extent that aligns well with the CLT principles.

**Figure 1** An Example of Planning According to Text Types and Grammar



Source: Based on MOE (2001b). *Guide to the English Language Syllabus (Lower Secondary)*.

*The Guide to the English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001b) provides lesson plan examples intended to help teachers to understand how CLT can be implemented successfully. Teachers are also suggested that they draw up their planning according to any one of the following: 1) Areas of language use, 2) Learning outcomes, 3) Text types and grammar, or 4) Theme/Topic. Figure 1 illustrates how planning can be drawn up according to text types and grammar. In addition to this, CLT-oriented pedagogical

principles such as 1) learner-centeredness, 2) integration, 3) contextualization, 4) spiral progression, 5) process orientation, 6) interaction, and 7) interaction are also crucial features.

## **5 Tackling the Wash-back Effect**

The implementation of the new *English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001a) has been generally effective but many teachers were quite worried about the examinations at the onset. This is also partly due to the teachers' preoccupied beliefs about the way the English Language is tested in Singapore. In order to ease these worries, soon afterwards, in fact, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Singapore Examination and Assessment Board, published *The Guide to English Language Assessment* (SEAB, 2002) as a companion to the *English Language Syllabus*. This document makes explicit the principles of summative and formative assessment explained in the syllabus and in the accompanying documents, the guides to the syllabus. These summative and formative assessment initiatives have been widely implemented in schools. However, this does not mean that teachers are completely convinced to implement the syllabus the way that it is recommended. Our recently completed research (Goh et al., 2005) suggests that implementing a new syllabus has been a challenging experience for many teachers and a decision to change the examination system is essential to its success. Quite a number of teachers we interviewed had grave worries about the effects of examinations despite their expressed willingness to take up the new initiatives. One way of reinforcing the effectiveness of implementation is through teacher development, as described below.

## **6 Syllabus Implementation through Teacher Development**

Despite the media's propaganda that very soon Singapore's education landscape will be changing drastically because of foreign educational institutions' readiness to participate in vying for the pie that is solely dominated by the local universities in providing higher education, insofar as teacher education is concerned, NIE is still the only teacher-education institution in Singapore. It offers primary and secondary school teacher education certification programs at three levels: a) at the Diploma level; b) at the Bachelor's Degree level and c) at the postgraduate level. The programs tie in well with the subjects offered in the schools. Based on this information, I now explain how syllabus implementation is made possible through teacher development. I will also examine how theory-practice connection and the integration issue are solved at NIE.

The theory-practice connection and integration issue most often debated in the teacher-education literature is much related to how teacher preparation programs can materialize the CLT principles through the syllabus. In Singapore the major change that one can imagine is really what is mandated by the new syllabus. As the new syllabus is a text-type based language-use syllabus, in initial teacher education, student-teachers have to be prepared as such; that is, the student-teachers need not only have the necessary language proficiency, which they all have, but also explicit linguistic or metalinguage with which to explain the language in the teaching process. This has been proven to be a real challenge. Although the language awareness movement in the United Kingdom has gained grounds and teachers are invariably prepared, NIE has really faced challenges due to the limited time that student teachers have while studying on the PGDE program, the bulk of our teacher-preparation platform.

The challenges are complicated by the fact that initial teacher-training is really pre-service teacher-preparation in its real sense, as student-teachers have never been prepared in any way that would familiarize them with principles of learning and teaching or the school context, of which pupil characteristics, class dynamics, teaching materials and school culture are essential parts. Student-teachers' understanding of these factors surely plays an important role in their transition and repositioning process, especially their role change from student-teachers to that of full teachers in the future.

As English Language teacher educators at NIE we will have to prepare our students well before they are posted to schools for practicum-related experiences, where experienced school teachers work as Cooperating Teachers (CT) in their capacity as on-the-spot supervisors. All these efforts are aimed at improving the quality of teacher education. These changes are typically reflected in the way that English language teachers are prepared at NIE to fully reflect the CLT principles of language teaching and learning. I now turn to the specific measures taken in this direction.

### *6.1 Scaffolding Teachers in CLT Syllabus Implementation*

The new *English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001a) indicates a shift in focus from the top-level policy-makers that English language teaching in Singapore schools has to be revisited. Obviously, this shift was made due to perceived as well as policy-makers' well-recognized neglect of grammar teaching in the preceding syllabus, as discussed in the literature (Ang, 2000; Cheah, 2004; C. Lim, 2004). However, C. Lim (2004) reports that this neglect has not been really true in reference to documentation



in the *1991 English Language Syllabus*. It is only a reflection on how teachers handle flexibility poorly when the English language items are not clearly listed as is the case in the *1981 English Language Syllabus*. This scenario is a case in point when an ecological approach is taken as a lens with which to examine ELT in general and CLT in particular. In principle, the idea expressed in the *2001 English Language Syllabus* is greatly influenced by the systemic-functional view of language; i.e., language learning has to be contextualized; this is because language has always been connected with form, meaning and function (Deriwianka, 1996; Halliday, 1978, 1985) and sociocultural factors are considered in CLT syllabus design. The new syllabus has mirrored changes in terms of learning and teaching objectives, expected learning outcomes and the principles of learning and teaching when it is contextualized in Singapore, with globalization in full view.

The implementation of a new syllabus, however good it is, depends upon the classroom teachers, but institutional support is quintessential. In order to successfully implement the 2001 syllabus, a content-upgrading course was designed by the National Institute of Education (NIE). The course focuses on various aspects that are essential to enhancing student-teachers' readiness to teach English Language in primary and secondary schools. It highlights linguistic knowledge such as interaction between form, meaning and use in language description, elements of context and genre which construct meaning in texts as well as some pedagogical knowledge of how these theoretical positions can be applied to the analysis of texts from secondary EL textbooks. It also foregrounds theoretical approaches to understanding language learning, psychological and social factors that influence language learning, notions of accuracy, fluency and appropriacy that are applicable to analyzing learner errors, systematic differences between standard and non-standard English in learner language, evaluating texts (oral and spoken texts) produced by secondary school pupils, knowledge of grammatical and other metalanguage terms used in the new *English Language Syllabus* (MOE, 2001a). In addition, it explores larger issues such as sociolinguistics and literacy education in the language curriculum.

In order to do so, examples of the curriculum text types are discussed in class so that student-teachers will be able to build upon what is covered in the previous lessons of the course. More importantly, in order to tie in well with language teaching as a profession, language reference resources are shared and examples of a year plan according to text types and grammar are illustrated. All this is done in accordance to what the syllabus has mandated. At the conclusion of the course, student-teachers feel more confident when they are asked of their career prospects in schools.

## 6.2 Exploring CLT Strategies

All the teacher-training courses are offered to prepare student-teachers with useful methodologies for teaching English Language in an integrated manner. Throughout the courses various ideas are incorporated into the skill components to reflect the changes as mandated by the syllabus. Theoretical input usually precedes practical-oriented experiential learning activities in the form of tutorials. It is hoped that at the conclusion of the method components they will be able to stand on the own feet in the future. Teaching strategies such as "activating schema knowledge", "mind-mapping", "three-level guide", "concept-maps", "DRTA – Directed Reading-Thinking Activities", "shared reading", "reciprocal teaching", "predicting", "SQ3R", "activating schemata", "jig-saw reading and writing", "using songs and games", "process writing", "think-pair-share", "teaching text structure", "summarizing", "questioning the author", among many others. Integrating all the skills in language lessons is highlighted (e.g. reading-writing connection, or reading-induced speaking and writing lessons). These activities and strategies are hands-on with the help and demonstration by the course lecturer. Group activities are proposed and practiced as platforms for training in learner-engagement and promoting learning. Topics such as formative and summative assessment and setting and vetting English Language test papers are also dealt with.

## 7 Reflection and Discussions

It is clear that CLT is concerned with the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence, of which linguistic ability is an important part (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Widdowson, 1978, 1990, 2003). It involves all the language skills instead of only oral competence. Savignon (2005), in reviewing the development of CLT, summarizes that both processes and goals in classroom learning are part and parcel of CLT when the term is used. The central theoretical concept in CLT, communicative competence, a term introduced in the early 1970s in discussions of language by Hymes (1971) and second or foreign language learning by Savignon (1971), Widdowson (1978), Canale and Swain (1981), and Littewood (1981), among others, is the major concern in this CLT movement. According to Savignon (2005), competence should be defined in terms of the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning. In curriculum design, the identification of learner communicative needs should be taken as a basis (see also Widdowson, 1998). She also reiterates that the mention of CLT nowadays triggers association with terms

such as process-oriented, task-based, and inductive- or discovery- oriented learning and teaching activities. In the context of some kind of confusion prevalent among second and foreign language teachers about CLT, Savignon (2005) emphasizes that:

CLT is not concerned exclusively with face-to-face oral communication. The principles of CLT apply equally to *reading and writing* activities (italicized added) that involve readers and writers engaged in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning; the goals of CLT depend on learner needs in a given context. CLT does not require small group or pair work; group tasks have been found helpful in many contexts as a way of providing increased opportunity and motivation for communication. However, classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature and may well be inappropriate in some contexts. CLT does not exclude a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness. CLT cannot be found in any one textbook or set of curricular materials inasmuch as strict adherence to a given text is not likely to be true to the processes and goals of CLT. In keeping with the notion of context of situation, CLT is properly seen as an *approach or theory of intercultural communicative competence* (italicized added) to be used in developing materials and methods appropriate to a given context of learning. No less than the means and norms of communication they are designed to reflect, communicative teaching methods will continue to be explored and adapted. (Savignon, 2005: 1164)

The Singapore experience shows that the obvious shift from the earlier *English Language Syllabuses* (CPD, 1991a, 1991b) to the new one (MOE, 2001a) in terms of a change in focus in both philosophies of learning and teaching and ideologies has made teacher-educators, school teachers and student-teachers realize that CLT can be implemented at a level that requires more understanding of the various aspects pertaining not only to language learning but also to language use. The Singapore CLT-centered *English Language Syllabus* (2001a) epitomizes the CLT principles explicitly, especially those stated in Canale and Swain (1981), through integration of reading, writing and oral communication, whereby grammar teaching through the mastery of texts instead of being in isolation has become the norm (Zhang, 2004a, 2004b). CLT cannot focus only on oral communication abilities. Instead, the syllabus recommends that reading and writing be taught within the framework of different text types, placing heavy emphasis on literacy development in children. These principles have been materialized with a very strong sociocultural consideration. Never in the 2001 syllabus has been any mention of using an exonormative framework for the English taught in schools. A standard variety of English, now commonly known as international English (see Widdowson, 2003), has been recommended. This standard variety that is grammatically correct and internationally intelligible (in this case, it refers to an endonormative reference) does not adhere itself to British nor American accent in terms of a phonological model to be decided upon. In fact, there is some kind of explicit recognition that accent is one aspect of the identity of a speech community or a nation that adopts English as one of the official languages. This decision has necessitated a need to aspire to attain a communicative competence that is generally culturally-socially situated instead of strictly following a Hymesian framework of reference, as explained earlier in this paper (also see Canale & Swaine, 1980; Savignon, 2005). Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of CLT is to produce learners who are able to use English for oral and written communication with the larger context of globalization in mind.

I argue, as I have done elsewhere (Zhang, 2004c), that, for CLT to be implemented more successfully, policy-makers at the ministry level need to revisit how English teacher preparation programs can be organized in such a way that the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and skills can take place concurrently with student-teachers' learning of the target language. Teacher preparation programs designed in accordance to this proposal will serve the dual purpose of improving trainee-teachers' language proficiency and enhancing their professional expertise. Following Widdowson's (1998) argument, I concur that local knowledge is essential. We must have a clear goal for CLT: Why do we have a need to adopt CLT? What are the needs of English in society? What is the general goal of English learning? These are fundamentally important questions that need to be addressed carefully. Given the perceived need for CLT, which has now been broadly agreed upon by many language policy specialists and language teaching experts, we need to examine how a contextually appropriate CLT approach can meet the local needs. Initial teacher preparation or in-service teacher education must take into consideration a proper balance between educational and pedagogical theory and practical skills and strategies in addition to providing linguistic knowledge and skills. The reason is that insufficient provision of educational theory and a lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills will make student-teachers over-reliant on specific teaching techniques that they will exhaust in a few weeks' time. Necessarily, TEFL teacher educators need to pay special attention to potential mismatches between theory and practice in conducting teacher training programs. They need to consider the concept and practice of culturally appropriate pedagogy in classroom policy and process decisions.

## 8 Conclusion and Implications

This paper examines the CLT principles and practice as mirrored in the 1991 and 2001 English language syllabuses, emphasizing the Singapore experience of taking an ecological approach to innovations in English language teaching. The principles of CLT were incorporated into the 1991 syllabus and an integrated, thematic and process-based curriculum was introduced. Unexpectedly, due to the fact that CLT was understood to mean that teaching should focus on fluency than accuracy, the formal learning of grammar was not given sufficient attention in practice by teachers in the early years of CLT implementation. This skewed practice could have been attributed to a certain extent of teachers' lack of what CLT was actually meant to be. Given the unique language learning environment in which students learn English in Singapore, the MOE regards it as very important for students to have a strong grounding in grammar. This is the reason why the 2001 syllabus states explicitly that rules and conventions of English grammar have to be accorded particular importance in addition to emphasizing effective learning approaches (Zhang, 2000b). This shift to grammar teaching within the framework of CLT is a manifestation of the ecological principles of language teaching. Instead of taking CLT as it is, the 2001 *English language syllabus* subjects CLT to the local needs, letting it serve the needs of Singaporean students. It is obvious that the older syllabuses reflect the trends of the time, and the two CLT-based syllabuses take care of learner and societal needs in different ways. This effort at the MOE level shows the syllabus designers' adroitness in meeting the language learning and teaching needs of Singaporean students. This is much due to the relatively small size of the country. By reflecting on the Singapore experience in my conclusion of this paper, I take the liberty of addressing several issues in CLT implementation in China with a full awareness of my limited knowledge of ELT in the Chinese context.

On several occasions, Li (1984, 1990; see also 1999, as cited in Li, 2003; and Xiao, n.d.) emphasizes the need for CLT to be implemented in EFL classrooms in China based on the understanding of what language is and how language functions in relation to form and meaning. Li (1999), in particular, rationalizes the need to teach language as communication by stressing the inter-relatedness of communication and humanity, namely, the essential nature of language: interaction and communication. In other words, language teaching professionals need to see language teaching as communication (see also Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Widdowson, 1978). Li (1999) cogently argues that:

The intrinsic connection between CLT and humanism lies in the intrinsic connection between communication and humanness, or, as language is a means of communication peculiar to human beings, in the intrinsic connection between language and humanness. Language is not something that a man possesses simply as a possession. Man acquires language so he may relate to others, and only in relating to other human beings that he himself comes into being as a human being.

The success of *Communicative English for Chinese Learners (CECL)* has shown that insofar as care has been taken in implementing CLT by taking into consideration learner needs, CLT is feasible. In fact, more recently, CLT has been expanded to include some focus on linguistic forms or language structures through corrective feedback or negotiation of meaning through some kind of form-focused learning activities (see e.g., Ellis, 1997; Foster, 1998; Skehan, 1998; Swain, 1997; Zhang, 2000a, 2004a). These activities definitely involve the teaching of writing in communicative contexts (see also Wang, 2005, for his proposal for the Length Approach in relation to teaching EFL writing to Chinese EFL learners). This movement also relates well to what we are reminded of by Widdowson (1998: 715); that is, the potential dangers of simplification of CLT by using labels and slogans in the field of TESOL. Widdowson argues that:

Certain current ideas about language teaching, expressed in the seductive idiom of catchphrase and slogan, are misleading. It is not the case that communicative language teaching focuses on meaning whereas the benighted structuralist approach did not: It focuses on pragmatic meaning in context rather than semantic meaning in the code. And the focus on pragmatic meaning does not require the importation of authentic language use into the classroom. This would be an impossibility anyway as the classroom cannot replicate the contextual conditions that made the language authentic in the first place. I think that language teachers should indeed be concerned with pragmatic meaning, but this can only be achieved if they localize the language, create contextual conditions that make the language a reality for particular communities of learners so that they can authenticate it, and so realize, in both senses of that term, the semantic resources that are encoded in the language. As TESOL professionals, we need to make language and language learning a reality for learners, and we cannot do so by bland reference to "real English." It can only be done by contrivance, by artifice. And artifice, the careful crafting of appropriate language activities, is what TESOL is all about. Note that I say appropriate, not authentic. By that I mean language that can be made real by the community of learners, authenticated by them in the learning process. (Widdowson, 1998: 715)

Earlier CLT proponents such as Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Littlewood (1981) and Widdowson (1978) never marginalized the importance of language practice while focusing on teaching language for communication. However, in practice, the followers of the “strong version” of CLT take a somewhat extreme direction. Language is taught really as a means of communication, without considering the fact that the students they teach are learners, who are in the process of learning the target language to communicate. Although efforts have been made to try to implement CLT in China at various institutional levels since it was introduced (Hu, 1982; Yu, 2001), challenges exist. However, my understanding is that many EFL teachers mistakenly associate CLT with teaching oral English or spoken English, or the ability to communicate orally. It is evident that it is a simplified, diluted and incomplete understanding of CLT. This is one of the challenges facing the Chinese ELT profession. If these challenges are contextualized, I assume that the Singaporean experience of implementing CLT could offer some ideas or lessons that might be worth exploring.

One of the lessons that Chinese TEFL teacher educators might want to glean from the Singapore experience is the issue of appropriacy and contextualization of CLT according to EFL students’ needs. An ecological approach to solving language teaching problems can be applicable in accounting for the current CLT practice in terms of resistance and acceptance to which EFL teachers have subscribed. I understand that the textbook series *CECL* for English majors has been successfully implemented in Chinese universities by virtue of the training provided such as the one reported in Li Xiaojun (2003) and Xiao Huiyun (non-dated). I make such a statement because CLCE has clearly defined CLT in relation to the communication needs of users of the textbooks. But how the English language textbooks in primary, secondary and senior high schools are taught with the correct guidance of CLT is equally essential to the success of English language teaching in China. It is my conviction that it is when the syllabus as a working document carefully lays out the contents to be taught that classroom practitioners will find it much easier to implement them through well-written textbooks supervised by steering committees comprising specialists with fully adequate knowledge of CLT and the culturally appropriate contextual needs.

Also, it seems that teacher training programs in Chinese universities and colleges overemphasize developing TEFL student-teachers’ mastery and use of the target language to the neglect of the trainee-teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills. In order for CLT to be effectively implemented, teacher training programs need to emphasize the principles and practice of CLT. An ecological approach to CLT has to consider students’ needs, abilities, interests, motivation, and the language policy adopted by a particular classroom community or the school/university. This necessarily involves teachers’ decision-making on the organizing framework to be used in lesson planning. They need to make choices from: 1) areas of language use, 2) learning outcomes, 3) text types and grammar to be taught/revised, 4) theme/topic, 5) audience, purpose and context of communication or language use, with a full view of which tasks/activities or resources they want to use for optimal learning outcomes.

An ecological approach to CLT requires that curriculum designers re-examine the program structure by relying on local knowledge with a global perspective to see in which ways a proper balance can be maintained so that, when student-teachers graduate from teacher training programs, they are well-equipped with both linguistic knowledge, language proficiency, pedagogical theories and practical approaches and strategies for effective language teaching according to school and learner needs. I have argued (Zhang, 2004a, 2004c) that having only one language teaching method course in teacher training programs at universities is insufficient in any sense of the word, and that a short stint of teaching practice, which is usually one month in duration (or in some cases, a trainee teacher only teaches 2 lessons during her one-month teaching practicum), does not give student-teachers enough opportunities to try the methods, nor does it justify the logistics involved. If an ecological approach is to be adapted, then policy-makers need to consider how CLT can be implemented in a staggered manner across the country with full understanding of the dos and don’ts (see Savignon, 2005). I believe that knowledge of these areas comprises the essential qualities that proficient and professional EFL teachers must possess. And only by addressing these qualities and needs seriously are we well positioned to enhance the quality of ELT provision within the CLT framework for optimal student learning.

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