

Editor's Note

The Emergence of Cultural Learning Shift in English Language Pedagogy and Teacher Education

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Education does not occur in a vacuum – it is the product of the context in which it takes place. Language education is of no exception. In the context of Asia, a common discourse relating to English language education is its presumed relationship with Asian learning culture. As a general term, Asian learning culture has come to mean the pervasive traditional view on the importance of literary education and the little value placed on knowledge acquisition for practical purposes. The authority of teachers as the purveyor of knowledge is usually unquestioned, as is the role of students as the mere recipients of knowledge. Corollaries of this perspective are the focus on literacy and the prevalence of teacher-centred learning. Rote learning, repetition and focus on the instruction given by the teacher are by way of implications important features of this allegedly established Asian cultural learning perspective.

Nonetheless, this cultural value-based explanation has been widely challenged for its oversimplification of cultures and ignorance of cultural diversity (McKay, 2002) as well as the considerable differences observed between language classrooms at different levels (Kubota, 1999; Savignon & Wang, 2003). The stereotypical view of Asian students as being passive, less vocal and opting for more direct, authoritative lecture-style of instruction is not always an accurate description. Zhang (2012) argued that the repetitive learning, unquestioning attitude towards reflections and more conforming thinking styles **associated with Asian learners are not necessarily a reflection of students' inherent** cultural dispositions; rather, they are more likely to be the result of varying educational contexts. In fact, in contexts such as Taiwan (Chung & Huang, 2009), Vietnam (Ha, 2004) and Japan (Kubota, 1999), more communicative and student-centred approaches have become increasingly common. The fast-pace expansion of international commerce, technology and communication resulting from globalisation has created concerns among governments of various Asian countries about the inadequate communicative competence of their citizens. The urgent need to prepare the citizens in order to be able

to compete globally has become the rationale for the fast recognition of more communicative approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and their inclusion in national curricula and syllabi (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007).

Butler (2011) argued that although CLT and TBLT have enjoyed significant popularity in language education policies in many Asian countries, constraints are aplenty. These constraints, according to Butler (2011), can be categorised into three types: 1) conceptual constraints; 2) classroom-level constraints; 3) societal-institutional level constraints. First, Western-imported approaches such as CLT and TBLT appear to be ethnocentric in the employment of their features (e.g. oral-focused activities, the importance of pair- and group-work, and the role of teachers as communication facilitator), and rigid implementation of the approaches means lacking sensitivity to local cultural norms and beliefs that may value the so-called “good communication” in different ways. Another misconception lies at the prevalent belief among teachers in the use of communication approaches that solely focus on the oral language without sufficient attention being paid to the language structures and accuracy, when in fact CLT, for example, does not exclusively mean oral interaction or preclusion of grammar instruction (see Savignon, 2005). Classroom-level constraint has also become an issue enmeshing the implementation of communicative approaches, since problems such as lack of teaching materials, large class size and limited hours of instruction are commonplace. There are also doubts among the non-native speaking English teachers who feel their language proficiency is inadequate to fully implement communicative activities in the classroom. This results in their resorting to what they think as a communicative method but appears to be a mix with more traditional methods such as audio-lingual or grammar translation methods (Littlewood, 2007; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008). Societal-institutional level constraints, in addition, could occur when educational policies, assessment-oriented education systems and limited exposure to the language outside of the classroom adversely affect the implementation of communication approaches.

Thus, what appears to be happening is that Asian countries are confronted with the challenge to implement communicative approaches in conjunction with the local traditions and educational norms. **Butler (2011, p. 44) identified that “...there have been a growing number of case studies that have tried to identify how best to adapt TBLT in various contexts, as opposed to solely addressing the difficulties with its implementation.”** Singapore, for example, implements CLT with emphasis on integration of reading/writing and oral communication while setting its own variety of English as a target model (Zhang, 2006). In Hong Kong, the adaptation takes place through the inclusion of more explicit grammar instruction in TBLT and stronger attention paid to **students’ examination requirements (Carless, 2007).** **Watson Todd (2006) reported that** major changes were implemented at a university in Thailand where greater emphasis on focus on forms and summative examinations means the curriculum it adopts seems to be mixed rather than purely TBLT. In Indonesia, grassroot performativity means that the teaching practice of English for communicative use has seen the rise of the production of

low-stake linguistic materials laden with cultural, religious and local wisdom of the Indonesian communities (Sugiharto, 2015).

The aforementioned adaptations are not solely methodological adaptations; rather, they signify some sort of cultural learning shift where the importations of certain teaching approaches or methodologies coming from one educational context are modified, reshaped and refined to meet the needs in another context. This occurs in the form of adaptations to cultural values, educational norms, religious beliefs and societal expectations. Sometimes the outcomes are completely new, as the language (English) is merely used as the tool – it is used as a *Lingua Franca*. As a *Lingua Franca*, English is a tool for the dissemination of local values and cultures. This is the case of the spread of teaching materials containing Islamic teachings in Malaysia and Indonesia, for example (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012).

But this cultural learning shift is not only occurring at the methodological level. Two domains in which cultural learning shift have probably gone unnoticed are classroom pedagogy and teacher education. It appears that a silent revolution is currently taking place in these two domains. This is what the articles in this *Language Education in Asia (LEiA) Volume 8 No.1 2017* are trying to capture. All the articles in this Issue demonstrate a cultural learning shift occurring in the domains of pedagogy and teacher education. The six present LEiA articles demonstrating this cultural learning shift are:

- 1) Paraphrasing in Academic Writing: A Case Study of Vietnamese Learners of English (written by Chi Do Na and Nguyen Xuan Nhat Chi Mai);
- 2) Using Extensive Reading Oral Reports to Enhance Spoken Fluency (written by Brian Wojtowicz);
- 3) Assessing the Efficacy of Dictation Exercises to Improve SLA Listening in Japan (written by Christopher Edelman, Robert McClung and Peter Ferguson);
- 4) Does Dictogloss Improve Non-English Major Students' Motivation and Grammatical Competence? (written by Nguyen Hang);
- 5) Changing Trainee **Teachers' Perceptions of School-Based Assessment** in Malaysia: An Exploratory Study (written by Mark Benjamin Smith);
- 6) Investigating the Influence of Webinar Participation on Professional Development of English Language Teachers in Rural Vietnam (written by Tien Minh Mai and Michelle Ocricano).

Dictogloss, paraphrasing academic texts, extensive reading and learning dictation have often been associated with the traditional view of literary education that places great importance on repetition, teacher-centred learning and strong emphasis on grammar. These pedagogies have occupied the English language education classroom worldwide for quite a long time; for example, Dictogloss was first invented about three decades ago (Wajnryb, 1990). But with the advent of technology notably evidenced by the occurrence of many language learning applications (Apps) (e.g Kahoot, Quizlet) and the rapid dissemination of the Internet websites on teaching methods and strategies, new pedagogical techniques are probably created every other day. Their increasing popularity

might see Dictogloss, paraphrasing academic texts, extensive reading and learning dictation struggle to retain the important place they once occupied in the language classroom, hence their value being questioned. One could therefore easily dismiss the importance of the aforementioned pedagogies. However, the present six LEiA articles provide contrary evidence. With various modifications to tailor to the specific needs of the students and to meet the demands of the local social and cultural contexts, Dictogloss, paraphrasing academic texts, extensive reading and learning dictation not only strive - they thrive. In each of the articles devoted to these pedagogical techniques, the authors successfully demonstrate the efficacy of their pedagogy given suitable adaptations to the local context.

First, Chi Do Na and Nguyen Xuan Nhat Chi Mai's study was based on the premise of the importance of paraphrasing in academic writing. Collecting data from ten undergraduate students through paraphrased texts and individual interviews, the authors found synonym employment as the most preferred paraphrasing strategy, as opposed to syntactical alterations - something that appears to have reflected their cultural learning dispositions. Second, the minimal focus on oral fluency development in Asia was the starting point for Brian Wojtowicz to develop Oral Book Reports that were inherent to Extensive Reading, a pedagogy that had mainly been highly individualised and literacy-based. Wojtowicz's study suggests that the integration of oral component into what has been widely used as a literacy-based pedagogy could increase reading enjoyment while **fostering students' speaking confidence, oral fluency and overall output performance.** Third, Christopher Edelman, Robert McClung and Peter Ferguson challenge the predominant conception that places dictation as a grueling pedagogy through their research. Their study suggests that spaced dictation, when appropriately designed and modified to cater for the needs of local learners, is proven effective in diminishing cognitive burden. This results in the increased student decoding and linguistic feature identification abilities as well as greater aural input processing. Fourth, Nguyen Hang highlights the important role of Dictogloss. Her study demonstrates the benefits that **Dictogloss could create in increasing learners' grammatical competence and learning engagement, underscoring the importance of topics that suit students' interests and local context.**

Cultural learning shift seems to also occur in language teacher education. Mark Benjamin Smith's article focuses on the implementation of School-Based Assessment, which is clearly a Western-imported method, in the Malaysian context. The findings of his study demonstrate the paradigm shift experienced by the teacher trainees once being exposed to SBA; the teachers developed more positive attitudes towards a student-centred **learning approach and formative assessment being integrated in SBA. Smith's study** clearly indicates the element of Malay culture of confrontation avoidance, which means that the implementation of SBA needs to integrate tasks that emphasise harmony, cooperation and engaging interaction. Similarly, Tien Minh Mai and Michelle Ocriciano's article on Webinars is in parallel line of reasoning. For the teachers in the study, Webinars were not only a practical response to the growing concerns about the lack of resources and professional development opportunities in rural Vietnam but also a

precursor to cultural learning shift. It is reported in the study that the teachers voiced shifts in their pedagogical perceptions in terms of resource-awareness in challenging classrooms, the promotion of gender equality and consideration on alternative assessments.

Our present day era of language education has been defined as the “post-method” era (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This is the era when full adherence to a specific method in the language classroom is probably irrelevant. The fact is that various types of methods and pedagogical techniques have been enacted, challenged and revitalised across time and regions (Fotos, 2005), and this indicates the more inseparable and complex relationship between teaching/learning and educational contexts (Butler, 2011).

The implementation of the pedagogical techniques and strategies in teacher education in the articles in this LEiA Issue not only demonstrates the inseparable and complex relationship between teaching/learning and educational contexts but also how educational learning shift is currently taking place. What the articles in this Issue suggest is the abilities of teachers to adopt the Western-imported pedagogies to meet the needs of the students (and teacher trainees) and to suit the local educational context. For example, where culture is the dominant local context at play, the pedagogy is adjusted to meet the local culture. This implies that there are always different practices in different contexts, even though the pedagogy that is implemented is the same. This further **reiterates Prabhu’s (1990)** assertion nearly three decades ago that there is no best method – there is no one particular method that works well with everybody in any teaching situation, in any context. Methodological and pedagogical modifications to cater for the needs of the students and the local educational context are therefore imperative. Thus, it is evident that there is currently a shift in educational culture in Asia in which English language education takes place. The shift is a timely response to the rapid changes of teaching/learning environments and the diverse needs of learners, appropriated within the local educational context.

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