

Culturally Appropriate Pedagogy on L2/FL Learning for Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) Influenced Students

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Abstract

English is learnt as a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) among Asian students such as Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese. They grow up under the implicit influence of Confucius, who postulated, among other things, that societal stability is based on unequal relationships (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2011). In educational setting, it manifests itself in adherence to the hierarchical face relationship between the one on top (i.e. teacher) and those at the bottom (i.e. students). As a result, Asian learners are typically quiet in the language classroom, a manifest as a respect to the teacher in Confucian heritage culture (CHC). This is problematic, as contemporary research pointed out that second language acquisition is very much dependent on the interaction among students and teacher when they use the L2 as an authentic communication tool (See Watanabe & Swain, 2007). As such, how do we reconcile the gap? One possible solution will be to adopt 'culturally appropriate pedagogy' (See Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006). In this presentation, relevant empirical and theoretical works in the field will be consolidated and reported, in the hope to arrive at an L2/FL pedagogy which promotes mutual collaboration and maximizes L2 acquisition on the one hand, and respects students' inherited culture on the other hand.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Confucian heritage culture (CHC), L2 acquisition.

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Introduction

With the effects of globalization and economic prosperity, keen interest is found for English instruction in Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. English is taught as the only or most dominant foreign language (FL) in their regular school systems. Failure to achieve a certain standard in English means difficulty or impossibility to be enrolled in tertiary institutions despite having satisfied all other requirements. As such, English is a major subject in the school curriculum; tutorial classes on English for (non)examination purpose amount to a multi-billion worth business.

Despite the keen interest and continuous investment, there is no evidence showing that Asian students' achievement in English has improved much. With the exception of Singapore (where English is the first and official language) and Malaysia (which is a former British colony), only moderate proficiency is found in South Korea and Vietnam, and low proficiency is reported for the majority of Asian countries such as China, Taiwan and Japan (EF, 2018). It is noteworthy pointing out that all those Asian countries mentioned share what is called Confucian heritage culture (CHC), whose population amounts to approximately 1.7 billion¹.

While achievement in L2/FL depends on many factors, such as student motivation, quality of instruction, length and manner of exposure to the target language, cultural factor may also be one which promotes or hinders L2 achievement, especially when national performance is concerned. In works describing what typical CHC English classrooms are like, the following are frequently mentioned:

- Teacher-centred interaction is the norm
- Students are reluctant to join classroom discussion and oral work
- Praise and encouragement are rather unusual

(Summarised from Barron, 2007; Carless, 2011; Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas, 2000)

While it can be inaccurate to generalize the effect of Confucianism in education, especially in the era of globalization where many Western thoughts and practice were incorporated in the way of lives in Asia, the thumbnail depiction nevertheless shed light of the possible root to some cultural phenomena constantly observed and reported in academia. It is also noteworthy pointing out that those classroom behaviours are rather different from what one would have expected observing in typical Western classrooms.

In an attempt to explain those unique classroom practices, this paper will first locate the root which may have influenced the way teaching and learning is conducted in CHC classrooms. With reference to the literature in second language acquisition, the paper then delineates the possible shortcomings of the stereotypical behaviours observed in CHC classrooms in language learning. Some recommendations about English instruction in CHC classrooms will be given at the end based on the theoretical and empirical studies in the field, in the hope to maximize the effectiveness of language learning without jeopardizing students' as well as teachers' Confucian heritage culture.

¹ Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/>

Possible explanations for the typical behaviours observed in CHC classroom

As aforementioned, what can be commonly observed in CHC classrooms are teacher-centred interaction, students' reluctance in joining oral work and lack of teacher's praise. A few more related observations are worthy of reporting. When there is constant press for more active participation by western teachers in class, CHC students are reported to have suffered from physical and psychological stress (Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas, 2000). Barron (2007) also reported several observations from his encounter with CHC students as lecturer and program administrator. First, voluntary discussion in the classroom is alien to most CHC students. Second, CHC students display a tendency to rely on only one particular information source in assignments. They also expect to be told exactly what to learn. Barron speculated that this may be due to the conception that knowledge comes from one individual only.

Language barrier is a plausible explanation for the typical behaviours observed in CHC classrooms. When one lacks proficiency in a language, (s)he is naturally reluctant to speak up. This is especially true for CHC students, who are reported to display strong intention to avoid making mistakes so as to avoid losing face (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). With students' lukewarm participation being the norm, teacher-centeredness is the natural consequence. Another possible reason which is applicable to some Asian countries like China is the huge class size. Because of lack of resource, there can be classes with more than 100 students per class at times. Administering classwork involving dense interaction among students and teacher effectively is difficult.

Confucius (551 B.C. to 479 B.C.) is the name that rings loud when it comes to the great thinkers who have immerse impact on the way of lives in East Asia. Among many beliefs he professed, one that bears high relevance to the possible explanation to the phenomena observed in CHC classrooms is his view towards the nature of a stable society. Confucius postulated that societal stability is based on unequal relationships (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2011). A stable society is one where the older generations assuming the position in the top of the hierarchy, taking the lead and providing guidance to the younger generations who are present in the lower end showing respect and executing the instructions accordingly. To reiterate, a stable society is based on unequal, rather than equal, relationship among its senior and junior members.

One can speculate that Confucius' view of a stable society has been manifested in CHC classrooms as:

- the hierarchical face relationship between the one on top (i.e. teacher) and those at the bottom (i.e. students).
- dominant teacher's talk to provide the guidance
- learners' quietness to show respect to the teacher

Worth-noting here are the different implications of learners' quietness between typical western and CHC classrooms. While learners' quietness may signify learners' introvertedness and/or lack of mastery of the content covered in both the western and CHC classrooms, it can also signify learners' respect to the teacher in CHC classrooms too.

The cultural heritage has great influence on the way CHC teachers behave in educational setting as well. Growing under the implicit influence of Confucius culture, it manifests itself in adherence to the hierarchical face relationship between the one on top (i.e. teacher) and those at the bottom (i.e. students). Teacher-centred interaction with the model of authoritative learning is thus the norm. Teachers should possess expert knowledge and be able to answer learners' questions anytime (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). Scollon, Scollon & Jones (2011) also observed that teachers are assumed of the primary role of transmitting knowledge. Teachers shall maintain strict order in the classroom. Students, on the other hand, should maintain 'deference politeness', a state of being polite but keeping a distance, towards teachers inside and outside school. They would also assume the teacher is most authoritative, corresponding to Barron's observation aforementioned, where knowledge comes from one individual only.

Possible conflicts between CHC influenced behaviour and principles of effective L2/FL learning

Recalling that being quiet can signify respect to the teacher rather than students' introvertedness and/or lack of understanding of the subject, spoken contributions are also generally viewed as demonstrations of ability and achievement rather than tools of learning by CHC students (Yates and Nguyen, 2012). It is noteworthy pointing out, though, that quietness and passiveness may not be necessarily equivalent. Quoting studies in the field of learning approaches, Tran (2013) argued the fact that CHC students consistently score higher on deep learning approaches and lower on surface learning approaches show that while being quiet, they are more reflective than passive. This may also explain why CHC learners excel in academic studies as shown by international tests such as PISA². Nevertheless, being quiet and deferent in class may be at odds with the effective language learning principles as shown by contemporary literature in the field.

One of the greatest influences in contemporary (language) education originated from Lev Vygotsky, whose socio-cultural theory (1980) inspired ample amount of research and remains a major yardstick with which good or bad practice in the classroom is justified. The crux of the theory states that social interaction is of paramount importance in facilitating cognitive and language development. Such development will become faster if there is the presence of interlocutors (called 'More knowledgeable others', or M.K.O.) possessing mastery knowledge in the target content or language actively participating in the interaction. In other words, it is the interlocutors in the external environment such as peers and teachers who play major roles in the educational process and are mutually influential. When this condition is met, students will be able to reach Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is a stage beyond their present capability. Vygotsky's views nowadays extend beyond classroom practice and academic paper. The growing popularity of Learning Commons, interactive learning space found within the traditionally static libraries, is a testimony. Vygotsky is also very different from another of his contemporary Jean Piaget, who attributed human cognitive and language development mainly to internal influences, in which interlocutors do not have much role to play.

² Source: <http://factsmaps.com/pisa-worldwide-ranking-average-score-of-math-science-reading/>

With Vygotsky's influence, group or collaborative work becomes an indispensable feature for any L2/FL lesson that is deemed to be good. A great deal of speaking in the L2/FL lesson is also considered essential because without which, meaningful interaction among the interlocutors cannot take place. Vygotskian school specifies that teachers cannot assume the center of knowledge all the time; knowledge shall be co-constructed among all interlocutors at least partially in the lesson. Uncertainties are bound to be around at some stages in this discovery approach but shall be treated as normal.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory forms one of the major bodies of work in contemporary L2 acquisition (Chu, 2019), and is the inspiration of the well-known 'Interaction Hypothesis' (Long, 1996) and 'The Output Hypothesis' (Swain, 2000). Interaction Hypothesis stipulates that meaningful face-to-face interaction with ample oral and aural skills involved results in effective language acquisition. The absence of which, on the other hand, results in the devoid or at least a conspicuous slow-down of the acquisition process. There are supporting empirical research results (See Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Littleton & Vélez, 2014; Watanabe and Swain, 2007; Mercer and Sams, 2006). It is worthwhile pointing out that teacher-fronted language lesson is considered ineffective in language acquisition according to this Hypothesis.

The value of verbal interaction in language acquisition is further tested based on the Output Hypothesis. Output produced in collaborative dialogue, where 'speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building' (Swain, 2000:102), serve to alert the learners the distance between their present competence and the target level of competence when recorded. Learners' conscious comparison between the two facilitates their language acquisition. In addition, after being taught metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning and evaluating), students were found to perform better in post-test in speaking (Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain, 1997). The principles of the Output Hypothesis were replicated in empirical studies with similar results (See Shehadeh, 2003; Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, & Fearnow, 1999).

The prevailing emphasis on oral interaction in contemporary L2/FL education on one hand, and the typical practice found in CHC classroom aforementioned on the other, are clearly at odds. The following section will focus on finding ways to reconcile the gap.

In search for a CHC compliant method for L2/FL learning

The ultimate goal is to find ways for teachers to promote meaningful interaction for L2/FL learning in CHC classrooms amid the cultural constraints.

Richards and Rodgers (2014) created a framework for analysing and comparing different contemporary approaches and methods of language teaching, which is reproduced as follows:

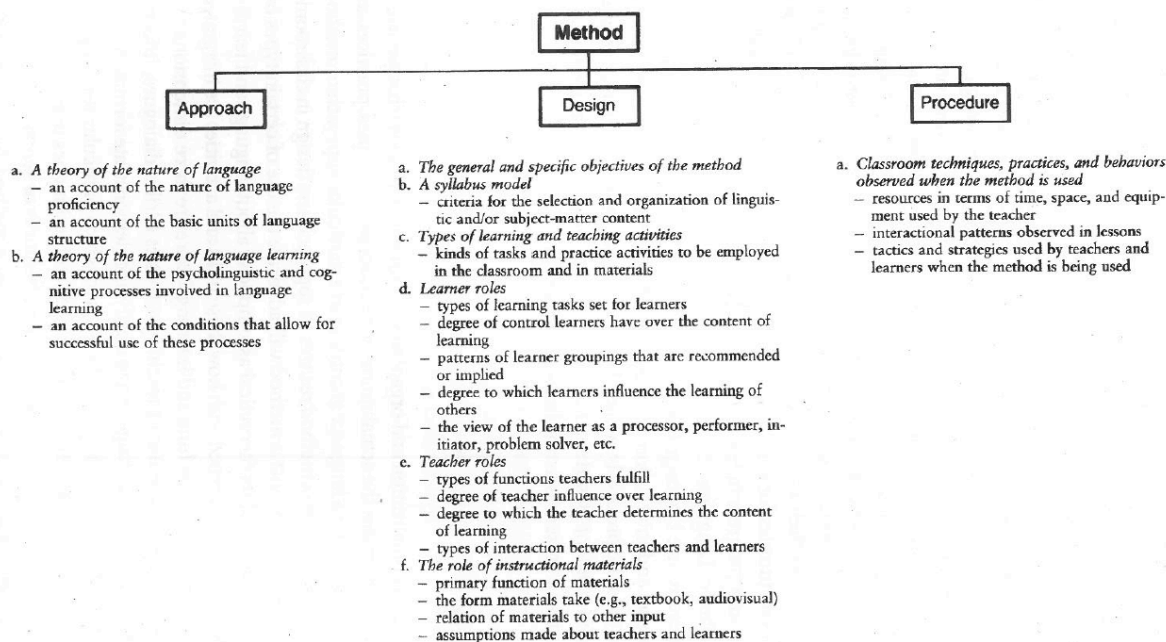


Figure 1: Summary of elements and sub-elements that constitute a method

Among the three major elements and their corresponding sub-elements, three sub-elements under the element ‘design’ are felt particularly relevant with regard to the search of CHC compliant pedagogy. They are ‘Types of learning and teaching activities’, ‘Learner roles’ and ‘Teacher roles’. Altogether five recommendations will be given for minimising the cultural impact in L2/FL learning in CHC classroom. Relevant theoretical and empirical evidence will be quoted for support.

D) Types of Learning & Teaching Activities

The first three recommendations fall under the sub-element of ‘Types of learning & teaching activities’.

1. It is preferable for teachers to give structured tasks which have clear objectives and bear lower uncertainty, at least in the initial stage.

CHC learners were found to display strong avoidance of ambiguity in matters related to education (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In the surveys administered by Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot (2006), it was also found that open-ended discussions or vague group tasks bearing fuzziness and potential confusion easily causes anxiety among CHC learners. Having said this, it is worth recalling that uncertainties, at least at some points, are part and parcel of the contemporary Vygotskian discovery approach of language learning. Delaying the more open-ended tasks until learners have passed their initial stages, therefore, is recommended.

2. It is preferable for teachers to provide some reading and/or writing materials, the text-based ‘visuals’, when executing oral activities.

The writing system of many CHC countries is ideographic (e.g. Chinese and Vietnamese) rather than phonetic (e.g. English). CHC learners habitually base things on reading and writing (Carless, 2007 & 2011). Lack of visuals can cause anxiety among them easily (Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006). This does not mean that oral tasks which involve plentiful amount of interaction cannot be assigned.

Rather, a teacher can strategically provide some input which is text-based, so that a corresponding oral task may stand a better chance to be successfully completed by CHC learners.

3. It is preferable for teachers to strike a balance between group and individual works.

Interviews remain a popular tool in eliciting CHC students' view about the way they prefer in learning. In two separate studies, in-depth interviews were administered to two different groups of students. The first study involves CHC learners in an Australian university (Wong, 2004). CHC learners there were revealed to prefer to work individually rather than in groups. Being able to have full control of the final product was specified as the main reason. The second study involves Korean students studying in US high schools. Similar results were found, where students (especially the ones with fewer years of residency there) were reported to display negative preferences for cooperative learning and positive preference for individual works (Park, 2002). Teachers may wish to take note of this preference among CHC learners, as there are studies showing that ethnic minorities' academic achievement can improve when the mode of work matches with their preferences influenced by culture (Kagan, 1986).

II) Learner and Teacher roles

The last two recommendations fall under the sub-elements of 'Learner roles' and 'Teacher roles'.

4. Hierarchy, with a group leader nominated by members directly or indirectly, shall be present in groups.

After interviewing 181 students in Vietnam, Nguyen et al (2009) reported that the presence of a group leader within the group is the most desirable mode of working in groups. Their observations in class also confirmed that such mode resulted in more effective discussion among all interlocutors. This is contrary to ordinary arrangement in oral or discussion tasks where members usually share equal workload and status. The possible reason may be that hierarchy is commonplace in CHC societies. As the proverb in Vietnam and Chinese goes, 'a group without a leader is like a snake without a head'. As for how the group leader gets selected, Nguyen et al (ibid) reported that the one perceived to be more competent would usually be signalled by other group members using body language and eye contact. Teacher may facilitate the selection should there be difficulty in some groups.

5. It is preferable that the teacher makes explicit the nature of the oral tasks and regulate them along the way.

As discussed, the conception that knowledge comes from one individual is rather common among CHC students (Barron, 2008). Teacher can take a pro-active role in informing students the requirement of the oral tasks, which are often student-rather than teacher-driven. Efforts are needed in persuading students that speaking, apart from an act of showing off, can actually be a tool for learning. Teacher can monitor along the way and serve as the facilitator to ensure contributions are on-task and accessible. With this, students will be more at ease while engaging in their own learning in groups (See Robertson et al, 2000 ; Yates & Nguyen, 2012).

Conclusion

Teachers teaching in CHC classroom are constantly facing the dilemma between teaching under the influence of cultural practice which favours salience on the one hand, and the need to actively involve students in interactive oral activities to help them reap positive educational benefits on another. With a greater understanding of how the cultural practice came about, teachers may be able to devise more informed teaching strategies suitable to their learners' needs. The ultimate goal is that despite the cultural constraints, CHC students in FL/L2 classrooms would be more voluble with the recommendations in place, so that they can truly reap the benefits of interaction in mental development and language learning.

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