

***English Language Teaching in China: new approaches,  
perspectives and standards. Jun Liu (2007)***

London: Continuum. pp. 340  
ISBN 978-0826490360 (hb) 978-0826480767 (pb)

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The notion of communicative competence, which defines the behaviors of a proficient speaker of a language, was first introduced to language teaching by Savignon (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980). Since then, communicative language teaching practices have predominated language education. However, as today's world becomes increasingly interconnected and technology-based, communicative competence now entails national and international sensitivities to new communication needs of global citizens. Theorists, researchers and practitioners are, therefore, searching for new theoretical directions and empirical bases for better classroom practice. *English Language Teaching in China* is a timely book that revisits and re-evaluates the history of language teaching. It distinguishes itself by pushing the boundaries, re-conceptualizing communicative competence and examining its applicability in the new century from both global and local perspectives.

The book opens with an introduction that orients the readers to the topic and a brief summary of the 17 chapters that follow. The 17 chapters are grouped in three parts. The first part 'Teaching English around the globe' (Chapters 1 to 6) presents an excellent overview of some theoretical issues related to teaching methods as well as thoughtful re-conceptualizations of communication competence in international English teaching. The second part 'Learning and assessing

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communicative competence' (Chapters 7 to 10) addresses various learning and assessment issues responding to new teaching challenges. The third part 'Contextualizing communicative competence in P. R. China' (Chapters 11 to 17) examines the applicability of communicative competence in a contextualized language teaching in China. Chapters in the first two parts are a collection of papers from respected scholars based in the U.S. and Australia, whereas chapters in the third part are contributed by researchers currently teaching and researching in universities in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Moving from theoretical frameworks from a global perspective to practical issues from a local perspective, the book meets the needs of a wide range of readers from theorists to practitioners. Although it specifies a focus on China, the book presents general theoretical and method implications for teaching English internationally in both EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts.

Part 1 starts with Jun Liu's opening chapter 'The place of methods in teaching English around the world' which serves an introduction to the role of communicative and other language teaching methods. The author does so by reporting a questionnaire survey of language teaching methods among 448 TESOLers (members of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) teaching in either ESL or EFL contexts. The findings that Communicative Language Teaching and the Eclectic approaches received the highest ratings for familiarity, preference and use indicate that methods still play an important role in language teaching. Different from previous scholars who distinguished teaching methods from approaches or principles, Liu defined method as a generic term for any language teaching model. The new definition, I believe, should resonate with many classroom teachers and teacher trainers. Based on the definition, Liu proposed a multidimensional model for conceptualizing language teaching methods. Readers should find the model useful in illustrating the complexity of describing and choosing a method in language teaching.

With the first chapter confirming the important role of methods, the following chapters (2–5) in Part 1 present strong and compelling re-theorizations of communicative language teaching. Each of these chapters deals with one main aspect of communicative language teaching. It starts with Diane Larsen-Freeman's chapter, 'Redefining grammar in contextualizing communicative competence', in which she refines grammar teaching as an approach to help learners develop a dynamic rather than a static grammar system so that they are adaptive to any communicative contexts. In Chapter 3, 'The uses of communicative competence in a global world', Claire Kramsch, switching to a social semiotic perspective, recontextualizes language competence in a global world featuring mobility, variability and change. Then Denise E. Murray, author of

Chapter 4, reconceptualizes teaching communicative competence along with electronic literacies. This is followed by Chapter 5 in which Lynne T. Díaz-Rico re-imagines second language acquisition (SLA) as a performative practice which differs from the naturally-occurring first language acquisition. These new conceptualizations of language teaching push and challenge readers to rethink language teaching practices: What grammar needs to be taught so that students can generalize from one communicative demand or context to another? How can we follow a social semiotic pedagogy to help students develop contextual awareness since diverging values and ideologies, apart from imperfect use of language, could also cause miscommunication in today's global world? How could computer technology be used to facilitate the practice of communicative competence? How could teachers help increase performativity if SLA is not a natural and native-like act? To further challenge the readers to rethink about English teaching, Part 1 concludes with Chapter 6 in which Jun Liu highlights the challenges and opportunities of collaboration between NES (Native-English speaking) and NNES (Nonnative-English speaking) teachers of English, drawing on the experiences of Shanto University in China.

The four chapters in Part 2 delve into specific issues and challenges of learning and teaching communicative competence. The first two chapters (7 and 8) present an overview of the relevant theory and research in the area. Steve Stoyhoff, author of Chapter 7, 'Assessing communicative competence: from theory to practice', explores how various theoretical principles could be applied to develop criterion-referenced assessments for communicative competence in local contexts. Context-specific assessments of speaking ability, as Stoyhoff illustrates, can be constructed by developing real-world tasks based on analysis of the context of language use and analytic scales that describe how examinees complete these tasks. Then Chapter 8, 'Learning communicative competence: insights from psycholinguistics and SLA', by Thomas Scovel, reviews research on various non-linguistic factors that shape the acquisition of communicative competence in a second language, including learning styles, motivations, memory, the top-down and bottom-up processing approaches, social interaction, and age.

Following the review of theory and research in Chapters 7 and 8, Jun Liu and Ulla Connor, authors of Chapters 9 and 10, direct the readers' attention to the factor of age in second language learning and the cultural/ideological aspect in the assessment of second language writing respectively. In Chapter 9, Liu reports a study that explores the effects of early English education in China. Based on his finding that the early starters in a rural school did not outperform the late starters, the author concludes that teaching quality and the amount of exposure to English are important external factors that affect students' motivation and learning achievements. Compared with Liu who

calls for a reevaluation of China's mandatory requirement to start English learning at grade 3 or lower, Connor argues, from an intercultural perspective of how norms of rhetorical style and content of writing change and differ across cultures, that a cultural/ideological level be added to the existing models of communicative EFL writing. Using previous examples from empirical research on Chinese students' and teacher' perceptions about what is good writing, Connor highlights the importance of developing writing tasks that are relevant for intercultural English learners and writing assessment that is sensitive to World Englishes and non-native English speaker norms.

Compared with chapters in Parts 1 and 2 that mostly focus on theory and research applicable to language teaching in general, chapters in Part 3 investigate the applicability of communicative competences in a contextualized language learning situation of China, a country that has millions of English learners. Among the seven chapters in Part 3, three endeavor to show teaching challenges that could be traced to a Chinese learning culture that respects teacher authority and prioritizes exams. For example, Don Snow, author of Chapter 11, 'Sustaining self-directed language learning in the Chinese context', reports an action research study on challenges of autonomous learning in Nanjing university of China. Also examining learning behaviors of Chinese students, Jian E. Peng, author of Chapter 13, 'Willingness to communicate in the Chinese EFL classroom: a cultural perspective', presents and discusses a study that connects students' non-communicative participation style to social and psychological factors in both individual (i.e., ability to communicate, language anxiety, perceptions of learning a foreign language) and social contexts (i.e., classroom climate, group cohesiveness, teacher support, and classroom organizations). Peng traces these variables to the Chinese learning culture heritage which prioritizes passing exams rather than communicative competence. In China where teacher authority is highly valued, the effectiveness of peer feedback poses another interesting research question. Yue-ting Xu and Jun Liu report their study in Chapter 15 'The effectiveness of anonymous written feedback from peers and the teacher on revisions in China'. By mixing the teacher and peer comments and presenting them anonymously, the researchers found that student writers accepted both teacher and peer comments and responded especially to those specific and word level comments.

Part 3 contains two chapters (12 and 14) that elucidate new initiatives in teaching communicative competence in spoken English in China. In Chapter 12, 'Using media to teach culture-specific gestures in the Chinese context', Jun Zhao compares the use of gestures of Chinese students when communicating in English and Chinese. The author elaborates on the importance to enhance Chinese students' exposure to native speakers in order to develop an awareness of culturally appropriate conversation gestures. Also suggesting

a new teaching initiative, Jette G. Jansen Edwards, in Chapter 14, 'Teaching pronunciation in twenty-first century China: models and methods', comments on the emerging models of English as an International Language and China English, as well as the implications of these models for teaching English pronunciation in China.

Readers who are interested in English education in China should find useful how some of the authors provide speculations on the Chinese culture and value systems that might have influenced English classrooms and students' English communication. These cultural and value systems include an expectation of teachers to be responsibility for students' learning, students' preference for non-communicative participation style in classes, and Chinese speakers' tendency to avoid using wide and frequent hand movements while talking. To deal with these issues in teaching Chinese EFL students, the authors suggest adopting specific strategies to sustain non-mandatory or autonomous language learning efforts (Don Snow, Chapter 11), using video clips of real English-speaking people talking in reality to introduce culture specific gestures (Jun Zhao, Chapter 12), conducting various pedagogical activities to encourage students' willingness to communicate in classrooms (Peng, Chapter 13), and implementing peer review by designing appropriate written feedback sheets and timing teacher intervention after peer response (Xu & Liu, Chapter 15). With these pedagogical suggestions, the book brings to light opportunities for new initiatives in teaching communicative competence in China.

Unlike most authors in Part 3 that report research in Mainland China, George Braine and Carmel McNaught, in Chapter 16, 'Adaptation of the 'writing across the curriculum' model to the Hong Kong context', describe their project that supports for writing in English at universities in Hong Kong. Since many local tutors and professors had little writing instruction during their secondary and undergraduate studies themselves, the authors describe how they adapted the USA model to the Hong Kong context by training and providing teaching assistants with a background in applied linguistics and second language writing to run writing mini-workshops for both undergraduate and graduate students. Based on their experiences, the authors stress the 'need for focused, customized and adaptive English writing support' (p. 326) in universities in Hong Kong where students' English writing proficiency is a great concern.

The book concludes with Liu's epilogue 'Beyond communicative competence: a pedagogical perspective' (Chapter 17) in which the author comments on the importance of raising students' 'competence of communicative incompetence' so that they could continue to progress after reaching a minimal level of communicative competence. Following Crystal (1997), the author highlights the need to go beyond the traditional practice of judging one's linguistic and sociocultural competence against the reference point of an ideal native speaker

to a new understanding of communicative competence ‘from intercultural perspectives in which language use is established by mutual recognition of interlocutors’ social identities’ (p. 333). The book ends with an important message for second language learners to develop ‘cultural sensitive knowledge, mindful reflexivity and social identity negotiation skills’ in order to be fully competent in using the target language for communication (p. 334).

*English Language Teaching in China* is a substantial read. The strength of book lies in its breadth and depth of the themes. While I enjoyed reading the book, I thought it would have been more effective if there were references made among chapters to help readers make better connections. Such a strategy would also enhance the coherence of the book. I also encountered a couple of typos. One of them (page 180, it should be ‘NS’ not ‘S’ for the overall score of 9th graders in the table) could cause confusion so I hope the author would correct it when the book gets a second edition. Overall, the book serves its intended purpose to target at an audience of researchers, scholars and classroom teachers. I welcomed the opportunity to review the book.

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