

*Article*

## **A Study of Chinese Language Teaching at British Universities: How Communicative are Chinese Teachers' Methods?**

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### **Abstract**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged from a paradigm shift in language teaching in the 1970s, which turned professionals' attention towards more communicative proficiency, than mere mastery of structures which stresses accuracy rather than fluency in language learning. Ever since, it has impacted on both the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and how other languages are taught in the world. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), despite its long history, has only in recent decades been considered a discipline in its own right, yet Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) is being taught increasingly widely in and outside China. Traditionally, TCFL may have been dominated by the Confucian-heritage teaching approach, but to what extent has TCFL been influenced by CLT in university settings in the UK, where most modern foreign languages have been taught by it. Following a brief summary of the characteristics of CLT, the author reports the findings of a study using data collected from a questionnaire (with 60 respondents) and interviews with 10 Chinese teachers working in British universities. The integration of CLT into TCFL has been identified from how the interviewees' classroom practice accommodated communicative activities and from their emphasis on authenticity, both of which reflect communicative orientation of the overall approach in TCFL. The teachers have also allowed the hybridity and co-existence of multiple methods in their classroom, just as most L2 teachers may have conducted in the post-method era. However, the Chinese teachers in this study do not sacrifice accuracy, despite using role-play and pair/group work to enhance fluency. Rather, they provide an ongoing focus on grammar and adopt explicit instruction, which, together with communicative orientation, forms the main characteristics of CFL teaching methodology in the UK.

### **Keywords**

Communicative approach, teaching Chinese as a foreign language, hybridity, explicit grammar instruction, British university

## **1 Introduction**

Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) is being taught increasingly widely in and outside the Chinese speaking community, yet teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), despite its thousand-year long

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history (Zhang, 2021), has only in the recent decades been considered a discipline in its own right. With Chinese as a fast growing second or foreign language in the world, over half a million learners from over 180 countries were expected to have registered their study in China by 2020 (China Scholarship Council, 2013). Although not all of them embarked upon their degree course in universities, they have ample opportunities to practise the language on and off campus. This increase in numbers of learners is reflected outside of China in both secondary and higher education. TCFL in Britain has gradually become integrated into curriculum of foreign language teaching in higher education since 1997, when the British Chinese Language Teaching Society (BCLTS) was founded. In the UK, a government initiative since 2016 enrolled almost 7000 students nationally in different secondary schools who were expected to be on track for fluency before they start their higher education (Institute of Education, 2021). Different from learners registered in China, these students' acquisition of the language largely relies on classrooms.

Practitioners and Researchers' attention has been paid to Chinese language teaching and research in areas such as general trends and policy-making in TCFL (e.g. Zhang & Li, 2010), specific methods of how to overcome difficulties in learning tones and orthographic systems (e.g. Hu, 2010; Guo, 2011; Yu 2012), how to maintain motivation (e.g. Du & Kirkebæk, 2012; Cai & Zhu, 2012), and how to lead to effective learning of different skills (e.g. Yip, 2002; Cai, 2018; Shen, 2018) through both theoretical and empirical studies in relation to Second Language Acquisition (e.g. Han, 2014; Ke 2018). These studies offered suggestions about how to optimise learning outcomes while revealing learning processes and evidenced the growing interest in research and pedagogical studies in TCFL. There are emerging studies on teacher beliefs and attitudes to TCFL outside China, on the basis of teachers' own experiences of being educated in China but working overseas (e.g. Cai & Ebsworth 2017; Wang 2011; Wang, Moloney & Li 2013; Wu 2017; Zhu & Li 2014). But these studies were not aimed at teachers' practices and perspectives.

Recent studies suggest that teaching methods in Chinese classrooms remain less investigated (Orton, 2016; Wright, 2019) and more targeted training is needed for teachers of Chinese in terms of modern foreign language pedagogy (Wang & Higgins, 2008; Zhang & Li, 2010; Orton, 2016). What seems under-researched is how teachers conduct their classroom teaching and what rationale or pedagogical beliefs they uphold. More specifically, TCFL was traditionally influenced by the Confucian-heritage teaching approach (Jin & Cortazzi 2011), but to what extent has it been influenced by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in British universities where student expectation tends to be high, as most modern foreign languages have been largely taught by it. This raises questions about what approaches have been adopted and what methods have been used in TCFL classrooms to university students who learn Chinese as an optional module or part of their degree course. The choice of approaches or methods is of significance both to develop communicative competence in the language itself and to develop TCFL as a more widely established discipline in general.

### **1.1 Emerging of communicative language teaching**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged from a paradigm shift in language teaching in the 1970s from the traditional Grammar Translation (GT), and the Audiolingual-Situational Methods. It turned professionals' attention more towards communicative proficiency than merely mastery of structures which stresses accuracy rather than fluency in language learning. The communicative movement stemmed from Hymes' conceptualisation of communicative competence. Namely, competent language use includes not just linguistic competence, but also embraces knowledge of language use that is vital to effective communication (Hymes, 1972). Seeing language more as a form of social behaviour than as an object to be learned (Savignon, 2002, 2007) led to a different paradigm for foreign language teaching-that is, language is not just a static system consisting of linguistic components, but a dynamic one entailing the expression of meaning between interlocutors. This view of developing language for communication has been termed the communicative approach; it is aligned with the functional approach

which views language learning as a means to achieve meaningful purposes appropriately in social situations (Halliday, 1985). CLT has ever since impacted both the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and how other languages are taught in the world. Language teaching encompasses the development of both grammatical correctness in language production and the appropriate use of grammar in specific situations and social contexts—that is, how and when to use utterances appropriately. In other words, the social dimensions of language learning are of equal (if not higher) importance to the acquisition of grammar rules. Language learning is thus considered to be more effective if learners can use the language to achieve their communicative purposes. This paradigm change has been translated into the requirements of international language assessment and benchmarking systems, e.g. International English Language Testing system (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines, or Australia's Curriculum for Languages (Orton, 2016).

## 1.2 Research questions in teaching Chinese as a foreign language

In the classroom of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, there exists a range of difficulties. Firstly, how Chinese can be taught effectively as a tonal language with the different script system from the Roman alphabet is still a matter for discussion. There is also the question of what approach and methods are being adopted in the actual teaching, and to what extent GT, Audiolingual-Situational Methods, and CLT have been implemented in Chinese teachers' weekly encounters with their students in university classrooms. The challenges posed here are not just from the language itself, but also from the expectation of students most of whom may have experienced CLT in learning other foreign languages (Wang & Higgins 2008; Wang, Moloney & Li 2013). Eventually how CFL learners have developed their communicative competence in the language through learning in the university classroom.

This paper is intended to address the above difficulties in the context of TCFL at British universities. It encompasses degree course in Chinese studies, joint or minor degree in the Chinese language, optional modules for non-specialists, and part-time leisure programmes. It starts with a brief explanation of the main characteristics of CLT, together with some key challenges and concerns raised about it as well as in relation to TCFL. This is followed by a review of existing studies on CLT in TCFL. The third section describes research procedures, and then reports the findings of a study using data collected from 60 questionnaire respondents and interviews with 10 Chinese teachers. The final section answers the following two research questions:

1. What teaching methods are being used in TCFL in British universities?
2. To what extent has CLT been influenced or integrated into TCFL?

Discussion over the questions covers how Chinese teachers' experience and beliefs impact upon their approach to their classroom teaching, and how to foster a communicative ability without sacrificing explicit grammar instruction in relation to the four skills. Moreover, it will look at what kind of training programmes can be offered to teachers of Chinese in order to assist their classroom teaching.

## 2 Main Characteristics of CLT

There has been much debate about how to define CLT, what its main characteristics are and what classroom practices can facilitate the acquisition of communicative competence. These debates stem from the fact that CLT is not a method, but an approach aimed to achieve spontaneous use of language in correct and appropriate linguistic form (Hedge, 2000; Littlewood, 2014; Wright, 2019). It can be argued that how communicative a classroom teaching is depends on the varying extents to which it reflects these characteristics, whether it shows strong or weak version of CLT. Below are the most relevant ones for

this paper (see Richard & Rodgers, 2014) for a detailed review of CLT) and how CFL may appear to conflict with them.

## **2.1 Meaning-focused, rather than form-focused**

A widely accepted characteristic of CLT is the primary focus on meaning, rather than on form in language learning, because meaning tends to be prioritised in real communication. Howatt (1984) proposes that it should be a strong version of CLT (see the weak version later) if the new knowledge is acquired through communication in the target language while learners simultaneously develop the language system as an implicit byproduct (Wright, 2019) when meaning rather than form is emphasised. As an extension of CLT principles, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has grown out of this strong version (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It takes tasks as units of learning, which are meaning-focused, and relates them to real-life communication in a spontaneous manner (Skehan, 1996; Savignon, 2007; Whong, 2013, East, 2017). Early CLT proponents claim that language learning can take care of itself if a teacher can engage learners in solving communicative problems in the target language (e.g. Allwright, 1979). However, in some cases, students were found to have developed inadequate grammatical competence (East, 2017). The focus on meaning also caused a false impression that structural accuracy could be ignored (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell 1997). Assumably, fluency in students' language should be prioritised over accuracy, which prompted the idea that students' mistakes and errors should be tolerated, partly in order to maintain their confidence in language learning and partly because not correcting interlocutors resembles real communication. Taking students' errors as a natural part of language acquisition and as an inevitable stage in reaching fluency of language use, CLT teachers do not typically correct them explicitly, but only provide feedback later to the whole class (Hedge, 2000). This has been criticised for causing fossilisation in language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) and students' errors persist in their use of language. Questions remain about whether communicative activities in class can lead directly to accuracy in language production and whether learners can develop their communicative competence automatically by participating in meaning-focused activities (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell 1997; Dörnyei, 2013). Therefore, how a balance can be struck between accuracy and fluency in classroom activities within limited teaching time has been among the key debatable issues ever since the start of CLT. In TCFL classrooms, typological linguistic distance caused by tones in verbal production and the different writing system poses a greater challenge in both teaching and learning. TCFL traditionally has been dominated by the Confucian-heritage teaching approach, but to what extent has it been influenced by CLT in university settings in the UK where most modern foreign languages have been taught by it? How the balance is achieved between accuracy and fluency to facilitate the development of communicative competence in Chinese among western learners (Han, 2014) can be an indicator of how strong the influence of CLT has been.

## **2.2 Function-oriented and communication-based**

The second important characteristic of CLT is that the process of language learning is function-oriented and communicative in order to overcome excessive reciting of grammar rules (Wright, 2019) while ignoring or delaying the process in which they are used appropriately. To achieve real-life purposes, role-play and pair/group work help to facilitate communication in the classroom (Littlewood, 2014). Also, information/opinion gap activities can offer unpredictability in meaning negotiation. By adopting such activities, teachers can motivate students to interact with each other in the target language in classes aimed for them to make progress and foster communicative ability (Ushioda, 2017). To further achieve a sense of real communication, teachers' delayed or minimal immediate correction may reduce the judgmental role and thus provide an equal and supportive learning environment. Therefore, what makes CLT different from traditional methods are the shifts in the learner and teacher roles. Students are

not passive receivers of knowledge but are active architects of their own language learning experiences through engaging in meaningful activities. Teachers become facilitators or advisors, guiding students' learning while participating in the classroom activities (Littlewood, 2014). In TCFL classrooms, this shift of role clashes with that of teachers as authorities and knowledge transmitters in Confucian traditions (Tweed & Lehman, 2002), which could be a barrier for CLT being implemented in classes.

### 2.3 Authenticity and integration

A third major characteristic of CLT is authenticity, manifested in the use of authentic material and the integration of skills in teaching. In order for students to be able to communicate outside the classroom in the target language, their learning materials should be closely related to possible language use (Hedge 2000). Thus, in higher level classes, authentic materials are used in their original form. Even at lower levels, teachers are encouraged to use materials adapted to aid comprehension. Moreover, to reflect real life communication, the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing should not be isolated in teaching, but rather be integrated (Richard & Rodgers, 2014). Due to the different script system of the Chinese language, it is very hard for western learners to build the connection between sound, meaning and form, especially at the beginning (Guo, 2011). In practice, some Chinese classes have delayed presenting students the Chinese characters until a later stage, but debates over advantages and limitations of this method still remain (Knell & West, 2017). Others have separated reading and writing characters as explicit drilling and memorisation exercises (Packard, 1990; Wang, Perfetti & Liu 2005). However, Everson and Xiao (2009) and Xing (2006) argue that some CFL teachers believe that communicative language teaching and learning, and authenticity in joining language and culture can be important for the development of communicative competence in principle.

According to Howatt (1984), the weak version of CLT emphasises the importance of providing learners with the opportunity to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes. That is to say, teaching can be seen as communicative if it manifests the second and the third characteristics above, and if students use the newly learned language to produce their own utterances based on a specific situation, or produce the structure naturally in context to achieve a real-life purpose. In other words, communicativeness still exists even if the production stage takes place after a teacher-led presentation and grammar practice (East, 2017). Although the language use may not be the same as real communication, at least 'communicative potential' is offered (Hedge, 2000, p.69), which leads to a communicative orientation in the classroom (Littlewood, 2014).

Following up the weak position, Long and Robinson (1998) re-conceptualised the traditional classroom practice as Focus on FormS (FonFS), in which each grammar item is explained deductively with drills and exercises to practise accuracy in contrast to the more communicative (FonF). They proposed that in CLT the focus should be on how to 'integrate form-focused and meaning-focused activities ... throughout the curriculum' (Doughty & Williams 1998, p.261). The aim of this should be to strike a balance between a focus on form and a focus on meaning, in order to achieve an optimal learning outcome (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In other words, they proposed that an increased emphasis on linguistic form while simultaneously taking a meaning-oriented approach could lead more favourably to acquisition (Dörnyei, 2013). Due to the typological linguistic difference of the Chinese language and challenges to its learning and teaching presented in western contexts, the current study will investigate how the weak version of CLT may have been implemented in CFL classrooms. I now turn to previous studies on CLT in TCFL.

## 3 Previous Studies of CLT Approaches in TCFL

A number of existing studies on CLT were found in TCFL at university settings both in and outside

China. The CLT principles are yet to be fully implemented in the TCFL classroom in China, where students have plenty of opportunities to practise the language with native speakers on and off campus. There are studies which described what CLT is and how the CLT techniques can be applied to the classroom. Yan (1994) illustrated that the most important feature of a communicative activity is to have a gap in information to enable necessary interaction between students in speaking tasks. Lei (2013) summarises the strengths of the CLT such as putting language teaching in real-life contexts and using authentic materials from newspaper and broadcast. CLT studies for TCFL inside China also tend to follow procedures and techniques used in Europe and the US, while comparing them with traditional methods such as Grammar Translation (GT) and Audiolingual-Situational Methods (e.g. Wang, 1988; Wei, 2005; Lei 2013; Kou & Li, 2012). In addition, Chen (2011) and Wei (2005) both find that students in the CLT and TBLT classroom are more of an active role in their own learning, rather than a passive receiver of the knowledge and outside stimulants. Applying the CLT principles, Ma (2000) listed specific functions and real-life tasks (e.g. completing a travel plan) that can be embedded in the language learning syllabus for overseas students learning courses of eight weeks long in China. The list however was only an initial exploration as to how functions can be directly related to certain grammar forms. Wu & Guo (2009) illustrated many communicative activities in teaching different grammar structures in light of TBLT, extending the approach to include task-supported language teaching in TCFL. It seems that most early studies on CLT explored its strengths and experimented the procedures in syllabus design and classroom practice. Although such teaching-based studies clearly prioritised a focus on function more than on mere linguistic structures, there still lacked empirical studies on how effective the CLT techniques may be for L2 Chinese. Also there remained uncertainties about how effective the approach can be in western classrooms where there are only a limited number of contact hours with learners each week, and where there is not much exposure to the target language as those in China, whether Chinese is part of students' degree course or not.

Reflecting on his own teaching of TCFL in Britain, Yip (2002) argued that university students as adult learners need rules as to how the Chinese language works, and explicit instruction should be accompanied with any communicative activity to facilitate learning. Wu (2016), working in an American university programme, stressed the connection with the CLT approach in that language structure should be used in the appropriate setting to express the correct meaning. Tinley and Board (2014) carried out observations of TCFL classrooms in Britain and reported that new language was introduced via listening and speaking, and that communicative methodology was widely used but without providing any details. Slightly contrasting this is Chen and Wright's 2016 report that even in CTL classrooms, teachers may still stress the importance of formal knowledge due to limited contact time with their students. Wright (2019) explored volunteer teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices about teaching Chinese to adult learners of various ages in a part-time leisure course organised by a Confucius Institute. She found that teachers used a combination of methods as they think they need in their teaching, but they have different emphasis on grammar and speaking. There were also teachers in her study who insisted on learning characters in explicit ways and who thought that a more CLT-oriented approach may help advanced learners better but may not apply to lower levels. While these studies offer more insights into TCFL classroom pedagogy, they lack specific details of how CLT was really used in classroom practice.

Among the few empirical studies focusing on CLT techniques in university classrooms where students learn Chinese as an optional module with only 2-3 hours each week, Taguchi, Li and Tang (2017) found scenario-based interactive practice in response to video prompts to be effective when students were learning formulaic expressions in order to fulfil communicative functions. Although they retained the use of the formulaic expressions well in role-plays under predicted scenarios even after two weeks, some students felt restricted in personal decision-making due to the structured nature of the communicative activity. In contrast, in Magee and Jacobs' (2001) study, where most of the 20 participants at the intermediate level of Mandarin had an Asian language background (e.g. Japanese, Korean or Cantonese), structured group tasks of jigsaw reading of a newspaper text in Chinese characters resulted in more

active student participation than unstructured group work. The latter involved the whole text being given to the group to read before discussion (though it was unclear how accurate student production was). Both group tasks also generated more learner-to-learner conversation than teacher-led tasks where the teacher asked questions and then nominated students to answer. Both studies demonstrated pedagogical advantages of CLT over a teacher-centred approach, but with different responses to the structured nature of the activities. In addition, Magee and Jacobs' (2001) study suggests that all three modes of teaching (structured group work, unstructured group work and teacher-led) played a positive role in classroom language acquisition and therefore should all be kept in the curriculum.

Different claims were also made in terms of how classroom activities can lead to the acquisition of specific linguistic structures. Exploring how undergraduates acquire the *ba*-construction, Wang (2013) compares Grammar Translation (GT) and CLT and finds that GT is statistically more effective than CLT when developing students' translation accuracy whereas CLT is not any better than GT in raising meta-linguistic awareness and enhancing students' oral development in general conversation. Yuan and Dietrich (2004) also argue that for linguistic items with complex functionality such as the *ba*-construction in Chinese, explicit instruction and intensive drill appear to be more effective (shown in test results) than CLT methods. Similarly, Hong and Wang (2016) report that the traditional 'Focus on FormS' instruction among 16 students who learned 10 new words merely to grasp their meaning, shape and pronunciation was proved to be more effective for vocabulary acquisition than the more communicative (FonF) instruction among another 16 students at the same level who initially learned the same 10 words for the purpose of understanding a passage. While these empirical studies have informed how CLT activities affect acquisition of linguistic items implicitly as opposed to explicit instruction, they failed to provide more insights into how widespread CLT has been implemented in TCFL classroom pedagogy at British universities.

## 4 The Current Study

### 4.1 Contexts and participants

In this study the researcher collected data through an anonymous questionnaire (see Appendix I) and follow-up interviews (see Appendix 2). The former was administered through the British Chinese Language Teaching Society with around 100 members with a return of 60 full completions from teachers of Chinese who had worked for different numbers of years in British universities on either degree programmes or credit-bearing optional modules in an Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP). A degree programme in Chinese Studies dedicates separate hours for listening, speaking, reading and writing, spreading over the week, while IWLP has one weekly session between 2 and 5 hours within which teaching of different skills are condensed and mixed together. All of the interviewees selected were based in ten universities throughout the UK. Their basic information is listed below.

Table 1

#### *Interviewees' Basic Information*

Teachers	TCFL experience (years)	Programme they mainly teach in British universities
T1	28	IWLP
T2	27	Degree
T3	27	Degree
T4	26	Degree
T5	20	IWLP
T6	14	Degree
T7	13	IWLP
T8	11	IWLP
T9	8	IWLP
T10	6	IWLP

To protect their privacy, each participant is assigned a code (T1-T10), which will be used in later data analysis. All personal information including exact age, workplace, and their exact educational qualification are deliberately vague (Zhang, 2020). Five of them aged over 45 had worked for over 20 years, among whom three worked nearly 30 years; the other five aged under 40 had worked for less than 15 years, among whom two had 6 to 8 years of experience in the field. This sampling roughly represented the demographic of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in teaching Chinese in British higher education institutions. They had gained their first degree in English or related subjects in China and had pursued their postgraduate studies in various subjects in Britain. Most of them did not have training in pedagogy, so they may not be able to identify or use terminology in relation to different teaching approach or methods, which impacts on how data is collected, e.g. description statements about each method are used, rather than the specific terms used in literature.

## **4.2 Data collection**

In designing the questionnaire specifically for this study, the researcher listed a variety of methods from different teaching approach-including GT, audiolingual and situational methods, and CLT-by their description rather than by the terminology themselves. Respondents were asked to choose how frequently they used each of them in their classroom where four skills are covered at both beginners and advanced levels. They chose from five options, ranging from never (1) to always (5). The items were representative of these approaches, with relevant statements about classroom practice drawn from TEFL literature (e.g. Richards & Rodgers, 2014). For example, ‘...leaving students to work out rules themselves’ and ‘... for communicative purposes’ were selected as respective examples of strong and weak versions of CLT. ‘Use...drill exercises’ and ‘translation of sentences ... in and out of English...’ were chosen, representing audiolingual methods and GT respectively (see more in Appendix I). The actual practice was phrased as a statement, rather than using terminology directly in the questionnaire, in order to offer more accessibility to respondents who may not be very aware of teaching methodology literature. These key words in each statement were also adopted as specific coding nodes later identified in data analysis. The methods from different approaches were included in order to cover a wider perspective of TCFL, avoid being restrictive about the respondents’ choices or imposing any preference on them.

Potential participants were emailed through the membership mailing list with the link to the questionnaire to be completed online, and they participated in the research on a voluntary basis. In answering the questionnaire, the respondents were given the option to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Ten of them (see Table 1) were then chosen for subsequent interviews according to their years of TCFL experience in order to assure the representation of the findings to cover a wider range of the teaching community. The researcher conducted a semi-structured face-to-face or online interview with them in Chinese for 0.5 – 1.5 hours, focusing on their teaching philosophy and their methodology in class. There are eight questions in the interview, with six of them being designed to offer a general discussion of the methods they have used in the classroom of teaching grammar and listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, and only the last two being related specifically to the communicative approach. This sequence was deliberate in order to avoid any pre-imposition on their answers to the previous questions and to reveal a more comprehensive picture of their teaching dynamics.

## **4.3 Data analysis**

Responses from the questionnaires were numerically described with the percentages listed of those using the main approaches (see Tables 2-4) to explain how frequently these methods are used by teachers. These will be further illustrated later with examples or extracts from interviews. Upon permission, all interviews were recorded and nine were transcribed verbatim, but the tenth was not utilised due



to technical reasons. The transcripts were imported into the software for Qualitative Data Analysis (MaxQDA) (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019) and analysed in light of emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013) around the features of teaching methods including CLT, with another colleague of Chinese looking into the relevant sections of the transcripts to ensure the inter-rater reliability. Extracts from the interviews were translated into English and reviewed by the interviewees for accuracy. The codings in relation to main characteristics of CLT from the interview data are shown in Figure 1. The size of the nodes in Figure 1 indicates the frequency of codings and these frequencies were used to identify common techniques and activities. The frequency of the CLT-related themes emerged from analysis was totaled in Table 6 which will be further exemplified with interview extracts. Those with the highest frequencies were illustrated with selected extracts from the transcripts.

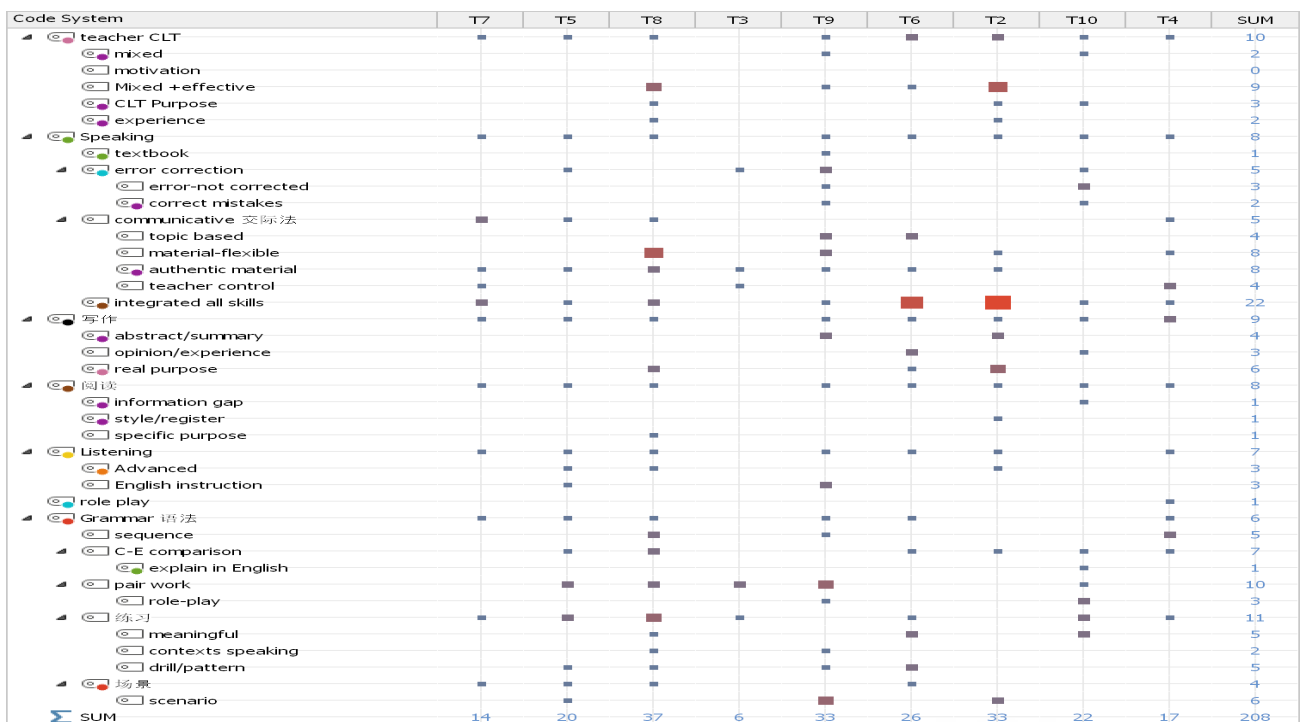


Figure 1. The coding matrix

## 5 Findings

In this section, the research questions will be answered in relation to the five themes emerged from analysis of both questionnaire responses and interview transcripts.

### 5.1 What teaching methods are being used in TCFL in British universities?

#### 5.1.1 Variety of methods

The survey results suggest that teachers apply a range of methods in TCFL in British universities, drawing on both CLT and traditional language teaching methodology. The calculated average percentages in Tables 2-4 indicate that 67.22% of the respondents often or always use communicative techniques, while only 7.9% said that they never or seldom do. Interestingly, the traditional methods of audiolingual-situational and GT are also used at a similar rate – by around two thirds of the respondents, with 64.86% and 66.67% respectively using them often or always, and less than 10% never or seldom using them.

Table 2

*Communicative Activities*

	never	seldom	sometimes	often	always
Use Chinese throughout the class even at beginners' level	6.9%	15.5%	32.8%	29.3%	15.5%
Provide situations and examples to explain grammar items, leaving students to work out the rules themselves	1.7%	5.2%	32.8%	36.2%	24.1%
Pair or group discussion among students	1.7%	0%	15.5%	29.3%	53.4%
Role-play in speaking exercises	0%	3.4%	19%	29.3%	48.3%
Writing composition for certain communicative purposes	1.7%	3.4%	24.1%	48.3%	22.4%
Average percentage	2.40%	5.50%	24.84%	34.48%	32.74%

Table 3

*Audio-lingual and Situational Techniques*

	never	seldom	sometimes	often	always
Correct students' errors as early as possible to ensure accuracy	0%	6.9%	31%	27.6%	34.5%
Adapt dialogues to suit students' interests, changing key words and phrases to ones they are familiar with	1.7%	5.2%	17.2%	41.4%	34.5%
Use concrete objects, pictures, and realia, actions and gestures to teach new language points	3.4%	1.7%	20.7%	39.7%	34.5%
Use repeated dialogues or drill exercises	5.2%	6.9%	29.3%	34.5%	24.1%
Do substitution activities to practise grammar structures	1.7%	6.9%	37.9%	34.5%	19%
Average percentage	2%	5.52%	27%	35.54%	29.32%

Table 4

*Grammar Translation Methods*

	never	seldom	sometimes	often	always
Use English to explain grammar	0%	5.2%	17.2%	41.4%	36.2%
Compare Chinese grammar with English grammar whenever possible	1.7%	6.9%	22.4%	27.6%	41.4%
Translation of sentences and/or text in and out of English to achieve accuracy	3.4%	8.6%	34.5%	29.3%	24.1%
Average percentage	2%	6.90%	24.70%	32.77%	33.90%

Among the respondents, 48.3% always use role-play in their speaking activities and the same percentage applies to those who often assign their students writing homework for communicative purposes. Meanwhile, 41.4% often adapt dialogues to suit students' interests and to situations that they are familiar with by changing key words and phrases; similarly, the same percentage always compare Chinese and English grammar or often use English to explain Chinese grammar. Despite the percentage using CLT being higher than those using the traditional methods, the small margin between them indicates that these teachers use the CLT activities slightly more frequently than the traditional methods in their classroom, but that they do not abandon other methods they regard as effective.

The interview with the teachers demonstrates more features of Chinese teaching in the classroom. The themes relating to communicative language teaching which emerged will be listed and arranged in Table 5 according to their frequency in the interview transcripts.

Table 5

*Frequency of CLT- related Themes*

CLT- related themes	Frequency
Authenticity (integration of skills, authentic material)	28 (22+6)
Communicative Techniques (scenario, role-play, pair work)	19 (6+3+10)
Explicit grammar instruction (Chinese-English comparison, explain in English)	8 (7+1)
Error correction (error-not corrected, correct mistakes)	5 (3+2)

In sum, techniques from GT, Audiolingual-situational methods, and CLT are applied and adopted by teachers to suit their students' needs and to achieve an optimal outcome in teaching various skills at different levels. For beginners, the skill of speaking is developed through role-play activities near the end of a session when relevant grammar points have been explained in detail in English and practised through examples in Chinese. Listening classes can cover real-life activities such as understanding time, food and drinks in a dialogue between imaginary friends at a birthday party, and can include comprehension questions with multiple options for students to choose. To develop the reading skill, a teacher asks students to translate a sentence with a key grammatical point into English, and also divides the whole class into smaller groups and assign different sections of a story for each group to read and then report to class what they have read. In writing classes, students use the key grammar to translate an English sentence into Chinese, but also reply to an email from a pen pal about their school days in England. Thus

different instructional approaches are integrated to develop the four skills. The integration of the target language with students' first language further supports translanguaging practices in CFL classrooms (Zhang, Osborne, Shao & Lin, 2020).

### *5.1.2 Different practice of error correction*

From both questionnaire and interview results, different practices are used to handle students' errors. There are different attitudes among respondents and interviewees regarding students' mistakes or errors. Some think it inappropriate to interrupt, whereas others believe that mistakes should be corrected, depending on the learning objective. T3 and T10 corrected mistakes in students' oral performance but not immediately afterwards; instead, they noted them down and provided feedback at the end of the class, or else they offered a recast (offering correct answers without pointing out where students' mistakes are) to allow students to compare and notice for themselves. Those who do not correct students' mistakes at all believe it is unnecessary to do so, as students will correct themselves gradually and produce correct forms eventually. They also think that students' confidence and initiative to talk in the target language is more important than correcting errors. For example, T7 does not interrupt his students even when the student's grammar is wrong. He justified his position with the experience below.

T7: .... I have a student who complained to me about another teacher. He said, in your class, I talk well, but in another teacher's class, he said my grammar was wrong. Once he said that, I dare not say anything anymore. .... (Extract 1)

This extract described different effects that error correction exerted on learning. That is, no correction may encourage students to experiment further with language while overt correction may hinder progression. Despite broadly following CLT practices, some teachers stick to the convention of correcting errors.

## **5.2 To what extent has CLT been influenced or integrated into TCFL?**

### *5.2.1 Authenticity in TCFL*

Out of interviews, the theme of authenticity in TCFL is demonstrated through the source of materials used and the integration of different skills. As shown in Figure 1, 'integration of all skills' was coded 22 times and thus emerged as the most salient CLT feature in TCFL. The materials used in teaching CFL listening and reading roughly fall into two types, one from authentic sources, and the other from the teachers' adaptations. At lower levels, teachers design listening materials according to what students have learned and base them on the situations that students could experience in imaginary conversations, such as an exchange between a plane passenger and a Customs Officer. At higher levels, authentic materials are used, such as listening to the BBC or CNN news dubbed in Chinese or reading Chinese newspapers, which normally fall into the themes and topics that they have been covering during the term.

In the interviewees' teaching, there are many examples of integration. To integrate speaking with listening and reading, the teacher asks students to verbally summarise key points and arguments or paraphrase a story that they have just listened to or read. After listening to the news, students discuss the topics reported and complete listening comprehension questions designed by the teacher (e.g. in T8's class), and listening is taken as a way of providing input for students to speak and write. Many writing topics come from reading, or are based on students' personal experiences, such as holidays or travel excursions, and viewpoints on certain social or cultural phenomena. In T2's programme, students write different guided compositions to respond to a real-life scenario, such as writing a complaint letter to the manufacturer. In T6's programme, writing is encouraged after listening to or watching a video clip. In short, the four skills are combined in TCFL.

### 5.2.2 *Communicative techniques used*

The interviewees report using a variety of activities, such as role-play, pair and group work, and information-gap activities which are generally viewed as communicative in class ('scenario, role-play and pair work' are coded 19 times in total in Figure 1). Speaking tends to be developed more communicatively than the other skills as students engage in conversations, resembling real-life interaction, imagining themselves to be the characters they are playing and acting out the parts for the requested activities. Role-play tends to happen near the end of the weekly session of 2-3 hours when learners are in a better position to use what they have learned and practised earlier, although this could be the final step of PPP (present, practise and produce), the class activity does offer opportunity for students to interact with each other in the target language. T7 reported that in his class, students use the language they have learned to book a hotel, for example, after learning a topic on travel. By using a real website to book the hotel, students (who were working in pairs or small group) discussed in Chinese what rooms to book, where the location should be, and so on. They reached the stage just before payment. Although the interaction was between students who may not have wanted to travel then, they were plunged into a real-life context in which they were encouraged to use their Chinese to exchange information with each other in order to complete a task. Although students are only rehearsing their real-world language use through these activities, the role-play offers social and functional aspects to the classroom and creates more social situations and relationships for language learning. The scenarios are mostly imaginary and are mainly sourced from possible incidences in students' everyday lives or ones that could happen while living in China. Extract 2 lists some possible role-play activities that T4 reported using, either unscripted or with elements of improvisation:

When you have lost something, how you might speak to a policeman, and how you might report the case and find your lost property. ... (if they were to) run an English class, how they might communicate with students or their parents, providing them with the necessary information, and the like. (Extract 2)

Students in T4's class can choose from a variety of language functions to fulfil the tasks. When they come across a genuine activity in their real life, they are more likely to reflect upon these practiced scenarios. These activities are not just drilling purely for the sake of structure, but rather aiming to achieve a kind of communicative purpose through scenario-based pair work.

The interviewees also reported using information-gap activities where students need to obtain information that they do not have from their partner through negotiation of meaning. An example of this is a 'jigsaw' reading activity in T10's class where the students fit together pieces of information in a coherent way from each of them reading a different section of a text. This gives students a real incentive to interact with each other. All these activities thus offer a naturalistic setting for learners to conduct conversations that resemble real-life and bring communicativeness to the classroom. It can be argued that compared with the heavily teacher-centred instruction, these activities increase the amount and intensity of practice, enhance student participation, self-expression and language use, and thereby provide a basis for language acquisition.

### 5.2.3 *Explicit instruction in grammar teaching*

All interviewees agreed that explicit attention should be given to grammar teaching, rather than allowing students to work it out themselves within limited classtime. In terms of the procedures followed in teaching grammar, there are generally two sequences depending on whether the context in which grammatical items can be used is provided before or after their explanations. Most of the interviewees prefer giving students a syntactic structure first, followed by exercises or activities enabling the actual use of the grammar rules in specific situations. They also believe that students learn

best when they actually need to use the language to express themselves and to achieve real purposes in particular contexts. Two interviewees, however, did explain the grammar after introducing students to it in specific situations. T9 taught grammar by first presenting a scenario and assigning students to work in pairs, and then asking them questions leading to the context in which the grammar item can be used. She then guided them to use the required grammar followed by a summary of the structure. As a result, students could become more motivated through working on the scenario, as their grammar learning is more context-based and meaningful.

The explicitness of grammar instruction can also be seen through the use of English and through drawing comparisons between English and Chinese. As shown in Figure 1, the coding of these two methods occurs 8 times in total. The frequency is also confirmed by the survey results (see Table 4). Almost half of the interviewees claimed that the comparison significantly helps their teaching of grammar. T4 justified the use of English as the instructional language for clarity and efficiency purposes within the limited contact hours, at least for beginners. T4 also emphasised that learning to write Chinese characters at the beginner level cannot be achieved by any CLT related activity, but only through using different strategies to remember these characters and writing them many times so that they can recognise them in reading longer texts. Therefore, explicit instruction still takes up a large proportion in TCFL classroom time, even though teachers value activities in which grammar can be used meaningfully and Chinese characters can be understood better in contexts.

## **6 Discussion**

Both the questionnaire and interview results demonstrate the hybridity of methods used in TCFL, e.g. different practices of error correction. As confirmed by previous studies (e.g. Lei 2013), no classroom is dominated by one method; rather, multiple methods are adopted, just as most L2 teachers have conducted in the post-method era (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This finding further supports Magee and Jacob's (2001) suggestion that group work and teacher-led activities are both conducive to language acquisition in the classroom. Apart from the multiplicity of methods in the TCFL classroom, the analysis of data shows that CLT has been adopted to TCFL in British universities with different levels of confidence and consistency (Wright, 2019). Communicative elements exist, rather than only mechanical drills and grammar explanation in the CFL classrooms in British universities.

The integration of CLT into TCFL has been seen from how classroom practice demonstrated the main characteristics of the CLT approach described previously. All the interviewees design various activities such as pair work, role-play and information gap in developing skills including teaching speaking, grammar and reading with focus on meaning. These activities used by the teachers reflect communicative orientation of the overall approach in TCFL. In spite of the limitations of the classroom, these activities have elements of improvisation and ensure lifelike communication through their unpredictability, meaning-oriented interaction, and problem-solving design. Therefore, it is clear that the weak version of CLT previously explained is displayed in TCFL. This finding contrasts with Singh and Nguyen's (2018) investigation into Chinese classrooms in Australia, where grammar and translation methods were predominately used with rote language drills.

The communicative orientation has also been reflected in the teachers' emphasis on authenticity. In higher level classes, the interviewees use listening and reading materials from authentic news broadcasts and newspaper articles in Chinese (though at lower levels, the study does not have the data to show this can be achieved). In their writing classes, real communicative purposes help students to shape what and how they write. This can be seen as further development of the syllabus and materials described by Ma (2000) and Lei (2013), reinforcing the belief that learning Chinese is not just about the knowledge of its grammar and vocabulary, but is also about real communicative experiences. This further supports Everson and Xiao's (2009) claim that authenticity and CLT are taken as important for CFL teachers.

Despite their belief in the importance of learning the language while using it, TCFL practitioners' concern over promoting fluency at the expense of accuracy still prevails. In spite of the communicative orientation in the classroom, grammar never receives less attention according to the interviewees. They explained the rules prior to or after attempting exercises or activities, but they presented grammar in the context of its use, rather than in isolation. Hence it evidenced a focus on form as suggested in Doughty and Williams (1998). This seems also to have addressed the concern raised previously over CLT as to whether a focus on meaning can lead to effective language acquisition (Wright, 2019). That is, they believe that teacher intervention in the form of a clear explanation offered at the appropriate moment can help increase the accuracy of students' language use especially in limited contact hours, which lent support to Norris and Ortega's (2000) argument that explicit instruction can help the speed of learning grammar in a setting with limited classroom hours. This belief in explicitness coincides with Ellis' (2017) overview which suggests that students do not develop accuracy in using grammar if their attention is not paid to the rules. The Chinese teachers' explanation helps learners to understand grammar points well in the process of using them. This practice of explicit instruction can be viewed as an effort to achieve a balance between fluency and accuracy just as studies on teaching *ba* structures (Yuan & Dietrich, 2004; Wang, 2013) where advantages of GT techniques were shown over CLT. In other words, even though the interviewees believed that a focus on meaning leads to fluency in language production, they still value accuracy. Hence, it can be argued that classroom practice in TCFL accommodates an attention to the structural system of language from a communicative perspective. This evidences the weak version of CLT previously explained, as grammar is delivered in specific contexts in which it needs to be used.

Moreover, most of the interviewees received their first degree in China. Their own learning experiences of the traditional teacher-centred teaching, an exam-oriented curriculum, and mandatory textbook use (Xing, 2006; Sung, 2010) may have impacted their teaching practice in TCFL, e.g. taking grammar as central and getting used to controlling the classroom. It must be admitted that activities and conversational scenarios are designed and controlled by teachers; however, flexibility in the form and focus of students' production still adds communicative value to language learning. These findings are in line with Magee and Jacobs' (2001) empirical study on classroom activities, which found advantages for structured group work over unstructured group work because of its controlled nature. In other words, communicativeness still exists but it is within the teacher's control zone, so the students' active role may not have been very explicitly demonstrated which still reflected the traditional belief in Confucian thought of teachers as authority. Chen and Wrights (2016) also holds similar claim that teachers prioritises limited classtime over explicit instruction of linguistic items though communicative activities still exist especially at lower levels. Therefore, TCFL in the UK does not seem to incorporate CLT's characteristic about the shifting roles of learners – teachers.

As studies (e.g. Zhang & Li, 2001) pointed out, most of these teachers may not have learned a foreign language through a CLT approach. Their effective teaching experiences were accumulated through years of practice, which are very important. Therefore, for any training programme for new teachers of TCFL, a comprehensive training of classroom pedagogy should be more beneficial at the start with systematic review and focus on communicatively oriented teaching (Wright, 2019). In particular, more emphasis could be given to how to integrate these valuable experiences with designing meaning-focused, task-based or task-supported activities consistently throughout different levels of Chinese teaching and learning.

## 7 Conclusion

In summary, communicative orientation, a hybridity of methods and explicit grammar instruction are characteristic of TCFL at British universities, which can be taken as a working model to develop communicative competence in Chinese. Various features of the CLT approach has been accommodated.

Meanwhile teachers have allowed the co-existence of multiple methods in their classrooms to suit their own contexts. Despite the hybridity of methods and CLT's influence on learners' active participation, teacher control is a major feature of TCFL. Chinese teachers also provide an ongoing focus on grammar while using role-play and pair/group work. In their teaching, belief in the importance of linguistic accuracy is still strong, as seen through the prioritisation of grammar and separating character writing from the four skills. Even when they adopt the communicative approach to develop learners' fluency, TCFL teachers never sacrifice accuracy. Rather, their explicit instruction helps to enhance accuracy, while maintaining support for fluency.

As a preliminary investigation into an overview of the classroom teaching of TCFL where there were 60 respondents of the survey and 10 teachers being interviewed with 6 to 28 years of TCFL experience, the study provided a starting point for further probing into the classroom pedagogy of TCFL. Future studies can be conducted through observing the actual classroom behaviours in order to gain more empirical evidence of methods and the CLT approach in action. This current study unfortunately had little space to explore how TBLT has been used in TCFL classrooms due to skill-oriented course assessment and limited hours of Chinese teaching currently dominated in British universities, which could be another direction for future research.

## **Appendix I: The Questionnaire**

SECTION I: Background information (omitted)

SECTION II: Methods used in teaching

How often do you use the following methods in your Chinese teaching?

(Please rate from: 1 Never, 2 seldom, 3 sometimes, 4 often, 5 always)

1. Use Chinese throughout the class even at beginners' level
2. Use English to explain grammar
3. Compare Chinese grammar with English grammar whenever possible
4. Explain detailed grammatical rules first in English followed by pre-designed practice
5. Provide situations and examples to explain grammar items, leaving students to work out the rules themselves
6. Translate sentences and/or text in and out of English to achieve accuracy
7. Use repeated dialogues or drill exercises
8. Concentrate on in-class textbook activities
9. Do substitution activities to practise grammar structures
10. Correct students' errors as early as possible to ensure accuracy
11. Use concrete objects, pictures, and realia, actions and gestures to teach new language points
12. Adapt the dialogue to students' interest and situations that they are familiar with by changing key words and phrases
13. Pair or group discussion among students
14. Classroom debates
15. Role-play in speaking exercises
16. Write composition for certain communicative purposes
17. Provide each student with a different part of a story to read and then ask them to put everything together later
18. Ask students to video-record their speaking activities and act out when possible



19. Ask students to talk to their peers to gather the information needed for their worksheet
  20. Use jigsaw games or information gap activities to practise grammar or dialogue
- My email address (optional): \_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix II: Interview Questions

1. Please describe yourself as a teacher of Chinese.
2. How do you teach grammar?
3. How do you teach speaking?
4. What kind of listening exercises do you do with lower and/or higher level students?
5. What is your general approach to teaching of reading?
6. How do you teach writing?
7. In using the described methods, do you think they fall into CLT approach?
8. Among the methods you used, which one do you think is definitely not CLT, but it worked well in your teaching.

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## 交际教学法在英国大学中文教师中的使用情况研究

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### 摘要

交际法兴起于二十世纪七十年代, 从根本上改变了语言教学的理念和模式, 由此前的偏语言结构的准确度转变为重语言使用的流利度。此影响遂现于各种语言包括英语作为外语的教学中。中文作为外语的教学历史悠久, 近几十年逐步发展成为一门学科, 其教学于中国内外日益广泛地展开。那么传统上熏陶于儒家思想的中文教学, 在海外受到了多少交际法的影响呢? 本实证研究以 60 份有效问卷和 10 个访谈的数据为基础, 调查研究了英国高校中文教师的教学方法。分析发现: 在后方法时代, 教师们融合多种方法, 强化流利度训练的同时, 不断以显性疏导的方式重视语法及语言准确度, 即交际导向与显性教学相结合成为英国大学中文教学的主要特征。

### 关键词

交际法, 中文作为外语的教学, 多种方法融合, 显性语法教学, 英国大学

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