

CHINESE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF  
COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**Chinese Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation and  
Effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching**

by

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## Abstract

This study profiled the understandings and perceptions of implementation and effectiveness of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach by nine university teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China. Four research questions were proposed: how do the nine university teachers define and understand CLT? What strategies, activities and material have they used in their teaching practice to reflect their understandings of CLT? If they have practiced CLT, what are the factors that influence their choice of using it? If they have rarely or never used it, what are the constraints that hinder their employment of CLT?

The primary data collection method used in this study was in-depth interviewing which was conducted face to face, by phone and on the Internet. The nine EFL university teachers were selected from six different universities or institutions in China, which are located in regions from the northeast to the very south – Hong Kong. They were interviewed through a number of questions proposed in the Interview Guide. Follow-up interviews were taken at the data analysis stage to clarify potential misunderstandings and to verify the participants' viewpoints.

The interpretations of the findings revealed that all the nine EFL teachers are aware of certain aspects of communicative language teaching pedagogy. Some of their understandings and interpretations exactly correlate with those presented in the literature. However, the findings suggested that most teachers had incomplete and inaccurate interpretations of communicative competence and CLT. They narrowed down the meaning of “communicative competence” by overlooking its social and

cultural aspects. Many of them perceived an equivalence of “communicative skills” with “listening and speaking abilities” or “getting ideas across”. They overlooked “appropriateness of language use” (Hymes, 1972a), i.e., the ability to use the target language appropriately in socially and culturally determined situations. The teachers’ lack of knowledge of and emphasis on social and cultural aspects of CLT was also reflected from their discussions on communicatively oriented language activities. They listed role-play, discussions, music, drama, story-telling and use of computer and Internet as communicative activities. These activities are, in a restricted sense, linguistically rather than communicatively-oriented, because certain linguistic patterns or drills were usually required in their communicative activities, which resulted in no truly genuine communication involving the social and cultural backgrounds of the target language and the students’ real communicative needs. The teachers neglected some important aspects of CLT, like meaningful tasks, purposeful interaction, intellectual stimulation, focus on the whole learner, etc.

A conclusion was drawn that there is a great need for communicatively oriented teacher training courses and professional development in China. On the one hand, the teachers had misinterpretations and inaccurate understandings of CLT; on the other hand, CLT seems to be more highly regarded in China than it was a few years ago and many teachers are willing to make a change from a teacher-centered instructional approach to more student-centered pedagogy, but they feel powerless to do so due to their inadequate knowledge of communicative teaching. Another conclusion was that an adapted CLT approach might be beneficial to Chinese English learners. Most teachers held the opinion that a pure communicative approach is not applicable to China’s present EFL education background and situations, due to a list of constraints



that arise from cultural conflicts and different pedagogical theories and practices when CLT is implemented in China, but a combination of CLT with a traditional teaching method or an adaptation of this approach to China's specific education contexts may be beneficial to Chinese learners' development of communicative competence.

Recommendations for educational practice were made concerning how to organize teacher training courses, CLT-directed teacher training programs in particular. Another educational practice for Chinese educators could be their attempt to try the communicative approach in English language teaching at the primary school level. Recommendations for educational research and development were made concerning conducting research on how to adapt CLT to specific education situations in China and, if CLT is to be combined with another method, what methods can be combined with CLT and how they can be effectively combined so that the resulting hybrid is still focused on developing students' communicative competence. To establish a new instructional method, researchers also need to develop a theoretical basis for it. Therefore, one or more language researchers teams need to be set up to develop English teaching theories more suitable for China's EFL contexts. Research could also be conducted exploring how to develop a model of communication-centered teaching pedagogy and curriculum design that Chinese EFL teachers could follow.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	i
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	iv
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	viii
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	1
1.1 Rationale for the study	1
1.2 Purpose of the study	2
1.3 Research questions	2
1.4 Significance of the study	3
1.5 Descriptions of the universities involved	4
1.6 Portraits of the teachers involved	8
1.7 Definitions of terminology	10
1.8 Structure of the thesis	11
<b>Chapter 2 Review of Literature</b>	14
2.1 Social nature of language	14
2.2 Teacher beliefs about language teaching and learning and implications for policy and practice	16
2.3 Communicative competence	18
2.4 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach	21
2.5 General situation of EFL education in China's Higher Education Institutions	24
2.6 Interpretation and practice of the CLT approach in China's Higher Education Institutions	28
2.7 The contribution of this study	33
2.8 Summary	34
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology</b>	36
3.1 Sites Rationale for sampling	36
3.2 Data collection strategies	37
3.2.1 In-depth interviewing	37
3.2.2 Follow-up interviewing	41
3.3 Recording and managing data methods	42
3.4 Data analysis strategies	42
3.5 Ethical issues	45
3.6 Summary	46
<b>Chapter 4 Research Findings</b>	48
4.1 Definitions of the CLT approach by the teachers in this study	48
4.1.1 Presentation of the interview data	48
4.1.2 Discussion of findings	50
4.2 The teachers' understandings of typical characteristics of the CLT approach	51
4.2.1 Presentation of the interview data	51
4.2.2 Discussion of findings	53
4.3 The teachers' understandings of advantages of the CLT approach	53

4.3.1	Presentation of the interview data	53
4.3.2	Discussion of findings	55
4.4	The teachers' understandings of limitations of the CLT approach	55
4.4.1	Presentation of the interview data	55
4.4.2	Discussion of findings	57
4.5	The teachers' descriptions of how the CLT approach has been reflected in their classes	59
4.5.1	Presentation of the interview data	59
4.5.2	Discussion of findings	63
4.6	Sources of the teachers' understandings of the CLT approach	65
4.7	The frequency of and reasons for the teachers' employment of the CLT approach in class	66
4.7.1	Presentation of the interview data	66
4.7.2	Discussion of findings	67
4.8	General perceptions of the CLT approach in the institutions of the interviewed teachers	68
4.9	The teachers' opinions on whether the CLT approach is applicable for China's general EFL education context	69
4.9.1	Arguments against applicability of CLT in China	69
4.9.2	Arguments for applicability of CLT in China	72
4.10	Teaching methods used most often by the teachers in this study	75
4.10.1	Presentation of the interview data	75
4.10.2	Discussion of findings	80
4.11	The teachers' understandings of the best teaching approach conducive to development of Chinese EFL students' communicative competence	82
4.11.1	Presentation of the interview data	82
4.11.2	Discussion of findings	85
4.12	Overall conclusions of the research findings	86
4.13	Summary	99
<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion</b>		<b>101</b>
5.1	Recommendations for educational practice	102
5.2	Recommendations for educational research and development	105
5.3	Limitations of the study	108
5.4	Concluding words	109
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>111</b>
<b>Appendix A Letter for Participants</b>		<b>117</b>
<b>Appendix B Consent Form</b>		<b>118</b>
<b>Appendix C Interview Guide</b>		<b>119</b>

## **List of Abbreviations**

CC	Communicative Competence
CET	College English Test
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
MUN	Memorial University of Newfoundland
NENU	Northeast Normal University
SL/FL	Second Language/Foreign Language
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

This research examines and explores understandings and perceptions of implementation and effectiveness of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach by nine Chinese teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The teachers were or are teaching at six different universities or institutes in China. Five of the interviewees were abroad taking advanced education when the interviews were conducted. The study is expected to throw light on current situations of practice of the communicative language teaching approach in some of China's universities. The research findings are also expected to provide insight into how to develop effectively the communicative competence of Chinese EFL students.

### **1.1 Rationale for the Study**

The literature reveals that, in the field of second/foreign language education in western countries, the communicative language teaching methodology is presently considered to be one of the most effective teaching approaches to developing learners' communicative competence. This teaching approach centers on developing and improving learners' abilities for actual communication and performance in the target language (Ramirez 1995; Paulston 1992; Savignon, 1983). Compared to a large amount of literature about the implementation of CLT in western countries, there are relatively fewer studies of this teaching methodology in China. In addition, in spite of many advantages of CLT, conditions in China may not be supportive of such an approach. For example, traditions of using a teacher-centered approach and state mandated grammar-focused examinations

may hinder its practice. Also, according to my own English learning and teaching experience, many EFL teachers in China hold some misperceptions and misunderstandings of the CLT approach.

Based on interviews with nine EFL teachers from six different universities or institutes in China, the study examines current practice of the CLT approach in the field of EFL education. Analysis of the collected data is expected to show both achievements and problems in EFL education in China.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore and describe how nine Chinese EFL teachers at the university level understand and interpret the communicative language teaching approach, and to examine and investigate to what extent and how they are implementing it in their teaching practice.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

To fulfil the research purpose, the following research questions were proposed,

- 1) How do the teachers in the study understand and interpret the communicative language teaching approach?
- 2) In their teaching practice, what strategies, activities and materials do they use in what they think is a communicative-oriented class? How do these reflect their understandings of the communicative language teaching methodology?
- 3) If they believe they are utilizing the CLT approach frequently, then what influences their teaching choices?



- 4) If they believe they are utilizing the CLT approach only in a restricted sense or not at all, what do they think are possible reasons and constraints hindering their implementation of the CLT approach in EFL settings in China?

These four research questions were developed mainly on the basis of Marshall and Rossman's suggestion that "the research questions should be general enough to permit exploration but focused enough to delimit the study" (1995, p. 26). On the one hand, I am quite aware of the necessity of focus of research questions. All the four research questions are centered around the topic of the understanding and practice of nine university-level EFL teachers on the communicative language teaching approach. On the other hand, endeavors were made to avoid posing questions that are so specifically defined that there will be less chance for participants to reveal their stories of deeper meanings and interpretations of the topic. Therefore, I designed my questions by lending some consideration to leaving space for my participants to unfold their stories.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study is expected to make some contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study might be a significant evaluation of the communicative language teaching approach, exploring whether this teaching methodology can be effective when implemented in an Asian EFL country – China. Are there constraints or difficulties in China prohibiting achievements of its potential desirable teaching effects? Practically, the findings in this study are expected to elicit useful implications for the adaptation of the CLT approach in China and to probe what might be a possible effective teaching

approach conducive to the development of the communicative competence of Chinese EFL students.

In addition, this study has a certain degree of generalisability and transferability. As the nine EFL teachers chosen for the interviews are from different universities scattered throughout China, a wide variety of views, experiences and opinions on the communicative language teaching approach can hopefully emerge. Therefore, while the research findings and conclusions would still need to be confirmed by further investigation, they may be transferable in a certain sense to EFL settings in other universities from which no EFL teachers were involved, particularly where there is a high degree of consensus among the teachers involved in this study.

### **1.5 Descriptions of the Universities Involved**

The following are general descriptions of the universities from which the nine EFL teachers were selected.

#### *College of Foreign Languages and Literature, University A*

Situated in the northeast of China, University A is directly subordinate to the Ministry of Education of China and is a very large national key university in China. The University comprises 31 colleges. In the College of Foreign Languages, the English as a Foreign Language program (EFL program) takes a leading role among other programs such as

Japanese program, Korean program, Russian program and Spanish program. In the EFL program, there are over 20 teachers, including 3 professors and 6 associate professors, and over 200 undergraduates and 40 graduates. Students mainly study the basic theories and knowledge in English language, literature, history, politics, economics, social culture, etc. They are trained for listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, with some knowledge of trade and business as well.

*College of Foreign Languages and Literature, University B*

University B, also located in the northeast of China, is an institution of higher learning under the direct administration of the Ministry of Education, being recently selected as one of the universities given priority in construction of the "211" Project, a Chinese government program to promote further rapid development of 100 selected universities. University B presently comprises 17 colleges/departments, with 8000 full-time undergraduates, 2000 M.A. and Ph.D. graduate students, 6500 correspondence undergraduates and 250 overseas students. University B now has over 1000 full-time teachers, including 200 professors and 400 associate professors.

*Non-major English Language Section, University C*

Established in the early 20th century and situated in the north, University C is a famous university in China. Currently, it consists of 44 departments, over 7000 faculty staff, with over 900 full professors and 1200 associate professors, and over 20,000 students.

The Non-major English Language Section, with a faculty of 5 professors, 15 associate professors, 28 lecturers and 5 teaching assistants, is responsible for English language courses for students other than English majors at all levels. It now offers College English (Bands 1-4), more than ten elective courses at the undergraduate level, and around ten elective courses at the graduate level. In order to create a better environment for students to learn and communicate in English, the Non-major English Language Section has organized an extracurricular English study group which is sort of immersion style English medium environment and opened a multi-media language laboratory.

*English Department, Institute D*

Institute D is situated in the middle of China. It is a military institution under the Third Department of the General Staff Department and is responsible for training foreign language specialists.

*Department of Foreign Languages, University E*

Situated along the southeast coast of China, University E has developed into one of China's finest universities. It was also selected for inclusion in the "211 Project". There are now around 20,000 degree-seeking students and over 5,000 enrolled in adult education. At present, more than 1,200 full-time teachers and researchers work for University E, including about five hundred professors and associate professors. The University consists of twenty-one departments distributed in fourteen colleges.

In the Department of Foreign Languages, there are over 100 staff, with 5 professors and 20 associate professors. Undergraduate programs mainly focus on English language and Japanese language teaching. English postgraduate programs include British and American Literature, Translation Theory and Practice, and Applied Linguistics. The department is responsible for public English teaching for non-English major students throughout the university.

*English Department, University F*

University F is one of seven Hong Kong universities funded by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. This institution was established in 1984 and has grown and developed at a remarkable pace. It now has around 18,000 full-time and part-time students and offers more than 100 academic programs in a wide range of disciplines. Some 900 full-time academic staff and 400 full-time research staff are devoted to teaching, basic and applied research, consultancy and other scholarly activities.

In the English department, degrees of BA (Hons) in Teaching English as a Second Language, BA (Hons) in English for Professional Communication, and BA (Hons) in Primary Education are offered. There are about 5 professors, 10 associate professors and over 20 assistant professors and instructors.

## 1.6 Portraits of the Teachers Involved

A teacher's background information can influence his/her teaching policies and behaviors. The following section briefly describes the background information of the nine teachers who were interviewed in this study. For the sake of anonymity, a pseudonym was given to each interviewee, which would also make it easier for the reader to remember who said what in the chapter of data interpretation and analysis. The nine pseudonyms are Lily, Tulip, Rose, Pine, Carnation, Primrose, Snowdrop, Lavender and Daffodil.

**Lily** had been teaching English at the English Department of University A for over twelve years. The courses she mainly taught included intensive reading, grammar, extensive reading and phonology. She has a great deal of experience of traveling outside China. She was once sent as a scholar by her university to study at a British university for one year. She also once stayed in the USA for one year as a dependant of her husband, who was doing research over that period. At the moment she is studying in Canada for a librarian degree.

**Tulip** was a young lecturer in the English Department of University A. She worked there for around three and a half years, mainly teaching English listening, spoken English and extensive reading. Two years ago she left China for the USA to do a Ph. D in Mass Communication. She is currently living in the USA.

**Rose** has similar experience with Lily. She taught English for around ten years in the English Department of University A and covered intensive reading, extensive reading, grammar and spoken English for short courses. She studied in Canada as a scholar in 1999 and returned to China upon completion. Two years ago, her family migrated to Canada. She is now doing a Ph. D degree in Curriculum Design at a Canadian university.

**Pine** is the eldest teacher who was interviewed in this study. As a very experienced teacher, he has been teaching at the English Department of University A for over thirty years. He has offered courses of syntax, general linguistics, English writing and pragmatics for graduate students. He has experience of working in Somalia for three years and experience of visiting Canada on three occasions as a scholar.

**Carnation** has been involved in the English teaching field for around seven years. She works at University B, mainly teaching intensive reading. She has never traveled outside China.

**Primrose** has been teaching at University C since 1997. She teaches non-English major undergraduate students extensive reading, English writing and intensive reading. She has never been outside China.

**Snowdrop** taught at Institute D for only two years. Years ago she came to the UK with her husband and now she is doing a Ph. D degree in sociology. She stated that she had

mainly taught intensive reading, listening English and spoken English to undergraduate students.

Lavender has been a TEFL teacher at the Department of Foreign Languages, University E for six years, primarily teaching extensive reading and grammar. She has never been outside China either.

Daffodil had been teaching at university F for four years before coming to Northern Ireland for a TEFL degree. She mainly taught the course of translation in Hong Kong. At present, she is doing a master's degree in TEFL at a university in Northern Ireland.

### **1.7 Definitions of Terminology**

Clear definitions of terms are essential for the enhancement of the soundness of research work (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). To ensure that both the researcher and the participants share the same understanding of conceptual categories used in this study, the participants were made aware through a handout of the following.

*Communicative Competence (CC)* refers to the knowledge of appropriateness of language application (Hymes, 1972a). It “describes the knowledge and ability of individuals for appropriate language use in the communicative events in which they find themselves in any particular speech community” (Hornberger, 1989, p. 91).



*Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)* aims to develop learners' communicative competence by having them interact in meaningful ways through the use of authentic materials and motivating and engaging activities focusing on social and cultural aspects of the target language.

*English as a Foreign Language (EFL)* refers to teaching or learning English as a foreign language (in a country where English is not an official language).

*English as a Second Language (ESL)* refers to teaching or learning English as a second language (in a country where English is an official language).

*Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)* in China refer to universities, polytechnic universities and institutions of professional education.

## **1.8 Structure of the Thesis**

This section outlines the layout of the whole thesis which is composed of five chapters.

As discussed above, Chapter 1 presents the rationale for this study, provides background information about the universities and teachers involved and proposes the research questions after the discussion of the purpose of the study. The significance of the study is also discussed. Definitions of terms which are frequently used throughout the thesis are listed near the end.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on topics of the social nature of language, teacher beliefs about language teaching and learning and implications for practice and policy, definitions and characteristics of communicative competence and the communicative language teaching approach, general situations of EFL education in China's Higher Education Institutions, and situations of understandings and practice of the CLT approach in these institutions.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology used in the present research. Since the research questions are designed to be descriptive, explorative and open-ended, qualitative inquiry is employed to elicit the teachers' understandings and interpretations of the communicative language teaching approach. The in-depth interviewing technique is used to interview nine teachers with ten open-ended interview questions. The follow-up interview is designed to achieve clarification of the collected data.

Chapter 4 presents the interview data which is organized in eleven categories defined in accordance with interview questions in the Interview Guide. Typical quotations from the interviewees are illustrated throughout discussions of eleven themes. The data is analyzed and interpreted in light of the relevant literature. The research findings for each theme are discussed and overall conclusions are made at the end.

Chapter 5 summarizes the whole research. A few recommendations are made for China's EFL educational practice as well as educational research and development. Limitations of this research are also discussed for the benefit of future research.

## **Chapter 2 Review of Literature**

Marshall and Rossman (1995) argue that “A thoughtful and insightful discussion of related literature builds a logical framework for the research that sets it within a tradition of inquiry and a context of related studies” (p.28). The review of literature for this study will first of all be concentrated on exploration of the underlying theoretical assumptions behind my general research questions. At this point, I will examine the social nature of language, teacher beliefs about language teaching and learning and implications for practice and policy, and definitions and characteristics of communicative competence and the communicative language teaching approach. After that, a review of the general situations of the EFL education in China’s Higher Education Institutions and situations of understanding and practice of the communicative language teaching approach in these institutions will be provided.

### **2.1 Social Nature of Language**

Traditionally, language was often seen as a set of linguistic symbols and rules which could be broken down into small pieces and taught as separate and discrete linguistic items or grammatical skills. In light of this view, language was primarily taught through grammar-translation methods that emphasize the mastery of grammatical skills and/or more recently through audio-lingual methods that stress habit formation achieved by practicing repetitive drills. The popularity of grammatical and structural views of language teaching lasted until the seventies of the twentieth century when more emphasis began to be placed on semantic and social aspects of language.

Vygotsky can be said to be one of the earliest linguists who made endeavors to explore dialogic and social functions of language. He defines “the meaning of a word” in the following way,

“The sense of a word...is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability.... The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 146).

According to Vygotsky, the meaning of a word is unstable and fluctuating, intimately associated with a range of personal experiences. A word’s sense is definitely not a collection of stationary dictionary meanings; rather, it is constantly dynamic and changing in dialogue. The same word can convey very different social meanings depending on the social and historical context. My supervisor Dr. Yeoman once gave me an example in our private course discussions. A 1980’s North American feminist might have associated the words “nylon stockings”, “high heels” and “lipsticks” with women’s objectification and oppression. On the contrary, in Nazi Germany, women who wanted to resist Nazism without actually saying so overtly and directly, because of the danger of speaking out, often wore sheer stockings, lipsticks and high heels because they did not conform to the Nazi ideal of womanhood, which was more clean scrubbed and practical. Thus the same words and items can take very different meanings in different contexts.

Similar to Vygotsky’s argument, the Russian philosopher and linguist Bakhtin (1981) argues that an isolated word, in essence, means nothing. A word itself embraces no

meaning at all if understood in a decontextualized way. It only possesses a “potentiality” of having a meaning within a concrete theme. A word’s meaning is extracted from its “potentiality” when it is related to a person’s emotional and experiential life.

A constructivist approach to learning also emphasizes the social context in which the learning takes place. This approach is generally considered to be the opposite of the behaviorist approach which is based on the assumption that students passively receive what the teacher teaches. Ornberg (2003) states that one central theme of a constructivist approach is that the learner should draw on his/her background knowledge to explore meaningful information through interacting with authentic materials. Learning, therefore, is a process in which the learner solves conflicts which arise between old and new knowledge and builds up new “rules” and “models” to accommodate his/her new experience [1]. “... learners can only make sense of new situations in terms of their existing understanding. Learning involves an active process in which learners construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge” (Naylor & Keogh, 1999, p93). According to constructivism, language learning should not be a process of receiving discrete linguistic elements but a process of constructing knowledge through active interaction with realistic materials and social contexts.

## **2.2 Teacher Beliefs about Language Teaching and Learning and Implications for Policy and Practice**

Generally speaking, every teacher holds certain sets of educational theories and philosophies, either explicitly or implicitly. These theories and philosophies, which are also considered as beliefs, are mainly related to teachers' thoughts, assumptions and judgments on teaching and learning. Teacher beliefs play an important role in education due to the fact that they determine and reflect many aspects of teachers' educational policy and teaching practice. Teacher beliefs about their roles, their students, their teaching areas influence their ways of teaching and tasks constructed (Nespor, 1987). They affect policy decisions teachers make and behaviors teachers show in the classroom (Rokeach, 1968).

Calderhead (1996) put teacher beliefs about teaching and learning into two categories: viewing teaching as a process of knowledge transmission and viewing teaching as a process of guiding students' learning. His classification of beliefs of teachers is actually based on a behaviorist/constructivist dichotomy. As discussed in Section 2.1, a behaviorist paradigm for teaching emphasizes that teaching is telling, a process of structured linear delivery of instruction, whereas a constructivist paradigm for teaching focuses on helping learners to build understanding and construct concepts for themselves.

The argument that teacher beliefs impact teachers' instructional policy and professional practice applies to the field of second/foreign language education which is part of the larger educational domain. ESL/EFL teachers' thoughts, decisions and judgments on second/foreign language instruction influence their choice of certain instructional material and certain professional styles and methods. Johnson (1994) concludes from her

study of the preservice beliefs of four English-as-a-second-language teachers that in the field of second language education, teacher beliefs are largely based on images and experiences of teachers' own language learning process. Similar to Johnson's statement, LeLoup (1995) also concludes that beliefs of foreign language teachers may be formed by the ways they were taught and by their perceptions of how they learned. Both Johnson and LeLoup argue that some of language teachers' past images and experiences may be effective in their own language instruction while others may have a negative impact on their career success.

Since the individual tacit belief systems play a fundamental role in determining the way teachers teach, professional development in education needs to first develop and promote teachers' personal beliefs about teaching and learning. This is why this study focuses on the teachers' own beliefs about CLT.

### **2.3 Communicative Competence**

Coined by Dell Hymes in 1971, an American sociolinguist and anthropologist, the concept of "communicative competence" (CC) was presented in reaction to Chomsky's linguistic theories which highlight the grammatical and linguistic aspects of language and largely ignore its communicative aspects (Hammerly, 1982; Savignon, 1983).

Chomsky (1968) makes a distinction between grammatical competence and linguistic competence. By grammatical competence, Chomsky refers to a speaker's ability to



recognize and produce grammatically correct sentences. By linguistic competence, however, Chomsky means

“...the native speaker’s knowledge of his own language, the set or system of internalized rules about the language which enables him to create new grammatical sentences and to understand sentences spoken to him, to reject ‘the ate goldfish John’ as un-English and to recognize that ‘flying planes can be dangerous’ is ambiguous” (Paulston, 1992, pp. 39-40).

In distinguishing linguistic competence from grammatical competence, Chomsky made great contributions to modern linguistic theories. Hymes (1972a), nevertheless, points out the limitations of pure linguistics by saying that “Linguistics, the discipline central to the study of speech, has been occupied almost wholly with developing analysis of the structure of language as a referential code, neglecting social meaning, diversity, and use” (p. 40). He argues that a sentence must not only be grammatically correct or competent, it must be appropriate in relation to the context in which it is used (1972b). What Hymes refers to as knowledge of appropriateness is “communicative competence”. In discussing how a normal child acquires knowledge, Hymes suggests that communicative competence is “a competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (1972a, p. 277). According to Hymes, a knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing the social meaning of language is equally as important as a knowledge of grammatical rules for understanding and producing the referential meaning of language (Paulston, 1992). Similarly, Lyons (1970) concludes that “The ability to use one’s language correctly in a variety of socially determined situations is as much and as central a part of linguistic ‘competence’ as the ability to produce grammatically well-formed sentences” (p. 287).

Drawing on Hymes' arguments, Hornberger also states that "Communicative competence describes the knowledge and ability of individuals for appropriate language use in the communicative events in which they find themselves in any particular speech community" (1989, p. 91, cited in Dean, 1996, p. 15). He then further elaborates the interpretation of "communicative competence" by suggesting that this competence varies along with different events, different individuals and different speech communities.

Similar to Hymes and Lyons, Canale and Swain (1980) also view communicative competence as the fundamental basis for actual communication or performance. Placing linguistic competence into a larger construct of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) develop a theoretical framework that identifies four components of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Savignon (1983) makes a detailed interpretation of the four components. In her view, grammatical competence is equal to linguistic competence in its restricted sense. It is "mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features of a language and to manipulate these features to form words and sentences" (p. 37). Sociolinguistic competence involves understanding of sociocultural rules of appropriateness of language use. Second Language/Foreign Language (SL/FL) learners need to know not only what to say and how to say it in a certain situation, but when to remain silent. Mastery of the social rules of the target language is an integral part of gaining real communicative competence. Since connection

and relations between sentences and utterances are not often overtly expressed, discourse competence becomes necessary. It is “the ability to interpret a series of sentences or utterances in order to form a meaningful whole and to achieve coherent texts that are relevant to a given context” (p. 40). Another vital component of communicative competence is strategic competence which, in order to sustain communication, is used to compensate either for the limitation of linguistic or social rules or for some extra-linguistic factors, such as fatigue, distraction and inattention. Some communicative strategies listed by Savignon include paraphrasing, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance, guessing and shifts in register and style.

#### **2.4 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach**

With the emphasis on communicative competence becoming apparent in language instruction, a new form of language teaching approach - communicative language teaching (CLT), began to be introduced in SL/FL classrooms around the 1970s. CLT aims to develop learners’ communicative competence by having them interact in meaningful ways through the use of authentic materials and motivating and engaging activities focusing on social and cultural aspects of the target language. Ramirez (1995) argues that communicative-based language teaching highlights the uses of language within certain social and interactive situations. Students are expected to practice language through classroom activities in which interaction occurs between students and teachers and/or students and students. Participants in such activities, in general, actively provide information for each other to bridge an information gap between them through both

utilizing linguistic forms and negotiating meanings of messages conveyed to each other by a variety of linguistic and/or nonlinguistic techniques (such as paraphrasing and gestures).

Drawing on works by many language researchers (Canale & Swain, 1980; Dubin, 1995; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Taylor, 1983), Li (1998) outlines the following features of a communicative language teaching methodology:

- 1) a focus on communicative functions;
- 2) a focus on meaningful tasks rather than on language per se;
- 3) efforts to make tasks and language relevant to a target group of learners through an analysis of genuine, realistic situations;
- 4) the use of authentic, from-life materials;
- 5) the use of group activities;
- 6) the attempt to create a secure, non-threatening atmosphere (p. 679).

Similarly, following understandings and interpretations of many scholars and researchers on communicative-focused language teaching (such as Higgs, 1984; Littlewood, 1981; Savignon, 1987; Vogel et al, 1983), Ramirez (1995) sums up the prominent characteristics of communicative-based teaching as

- stressing the functional uses of language in different social settings;

- organizing classroom activities that relate language forms with functions and offer functional practice within social situations;
- using materials that are interesting, intellectually stimulating and challenging to learners;
- incorporating language tasks that involve information gathering, collaboration and purposeful interaction;
- focusing on the whole learner - the cognitive, physical and affective qualities; providing learners with opportunities to share and explore their attitudes, feelings and opinions;
- offering learners opportunities to integrate different sets of language skills to complete language tasks (pp. 10-11).

Apart from the characteristics listed above, Anderson (1993) suggests that with a communicative approach, there will be sensitivity to learners' differences and there will be an awareness of variations in language use rather than simply attention to the language.

Littlewood (1981) formulates specific procedures for ESL learners to develop communicative competence. In his view, a communicative-oriented language class is generally organized by both precommunicative activities and communicative activities. Precommunicative activities are composed of structural practice and quasi-communicative practice, focusing on linguistic forms of the target language and on the correlation of the linguistic forms with their potential functional meanings.

Communicative activities consist of functional practice and social activities, focusing on the sharing of information and social interaction.

## **2.5 General Situation of EFL Education in China's Higher Education Institutions**

English language education in China is shaped by a perception that English is an essential tool for the Chinese to learn the advanced technology of western countries so as to develop and change China's economic system (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). English teaching is a very important component in China's education system. English is a core course in both middle school and high school education. It is a key section in the national university entrance examination. English language instruction in China's higher educational institutes is composed of two parts: public English and English majors. Public English programs are designed for non-English major students who major in other subjects but take English as a course in their program. Public English programs were suspended over the Culture Revolution period (1966 – 1976), but reactivated in 1979. Non-English major students are generally required to be able to read and write in English. English major programs for students majoring in English started long before the establishment of the People's Republic of China and they are focused on training English-speaking specialists.

English language education in China's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has made tremendous advances in the last twenty years. There is a growing number of students doing the English language course, either compulsorily or optionally. In most institutions

and universities, the English language course is required. In recent years, spoken English and English listening skills are receiving greater emphases than before. Language activities conducive to the development of students' speaking and listening capabilities are viewed by many teachers as a necessity rather than a waste of time. Advanced technology, such as multi-media language laboratories, is used in universities where sufficient funding is available.

The achievements of English education can also be reflected in China's College English Test (CET). Implemented from 1987, CET is a national English test aiming to objectively and accurately evaluate English skills of non-English major undergraduates and postgraduates. CET Band 4 and Band 6 (Band 6 is a higher level test than Band 4) are designed according to the College English Teaching Syllabus. The structures and contents of these tests mainly focus on testing students' grammatical, reading and writing abilities. Presently, an average of 2.4 million English learners are registered for CET each year. An oral test has been added in CET in some universities from May 1999, which is intended to promote the development of students' listening and speaking skills. College students are normally required to take CET Band 4. Statistics based on the College English Test results reveal that the English level of college students is improving each year. Lin (2002) states that during the past two decades, "The reading speed of college students has reached 70 to 100 words per minute and their vocabulary has surpassed 4,200 words". College students can normally read ordinary English newspapers and magazines and communicate in English.

In spite of all the apparent achievements, English language education in China still has many limitations. For public English programs, the problems mainly include 1) unstable teaching staff and their lack of enthusiasm; 2) overemphasis on teaching for examinations; 3) slow development and reform concerning the needs of the national economy and technology (Liu, 1999). With China's radical development of economy and technology, China urgently needs all kinds of specialists who are expected to be competent in English in their specialized areas. But because the majority of the public English teachers follow the same teaching syllabus which focuses on the linguistic aspects of the English language rather than specialized English training, this need can hardly be met.

Similar to Liu (1999), Lin (2002) outlines six problems that currently exist in China's public college English education:

- 1) The system of public college English teaching is not cohesive with that of primary and middle schools. There exist gaps and overlaps in teaching content, courses, textbooks and teaching methods between the public college English and English teaching at middle schools in China's different provinces.
- 2) The main aim of public college English teaching is to develop students' reading ability. Communicative skills such as listening and speaking are not given enough attention.
- 3) Public college English teaching cannot meet the needs of personnel in specialized subjects such as science because all teachers follow the same teaching syllabus.



- 4) There is a lack of funding for advanced teaching equipment and for training public college English teachers who are mostly young postgraduates.
- 5) More studies on the reform of public college English teaching need to be done, such as studies on teaching methods, reform of courses and change of textbooks.
- 6) Evaluation and test methods need to be improved.

Limitations in English major education are very similar to the problems in the public college English teaching. Liu (1999) states that many English major teachers don't have a sense of crisis and reform. There is a lack of innovation in teaching methods, curriculum design, teaching material and test system. Also, many teachers do not understand students' knowledge structure and capabilities and therefore there is a strong need for teacher training.

The China Education and Research Network Information Center website [2] also reveals some aspects of the current situation of EFL education in most of China's HEIs. The traditional English language teaching approach, centered on instruction of vocabulary, grammar and reading, is still dominant in many EFL teaching contexts. Although mastery of listening and speaking skills is attracting more attention from educators and although listening skills tests are being incorporated into some English proficiency tests, there is still no real structural change. In addition, because improvement of listening and speaking abilities is a long process, taking a long time to enhance through much practice, some students feel they have not learned much and teachers feel they have not taught much in listening and speaking classes. So both students and teachers may prefer the traditional

teaching approach, with its emphasis on memorizing discrete items. Students like to spend a large amount of time in memorizing new words and phrases, without quite knowing when, where and how to use them in real communication situations. Many students have few chances to participate in authentic speech events which allow them to communicate with English-speaking people.

## **2.6 Interpretation and Practice of the CLT Approach in China's Higher Education Institutions**

China's modernization program and rapid economic growth in the last two decades have created a need for a large number of people with a good command of English, particularly in communicative competence. Realizing the need of developing students' communicative skills, EFL teachers at varying levels of education in China started to introduce CLT into classrooms since the early 1980s. Communicative oriented language activities have received more attention than before in EFL classes. Various textbooks and extracurricular books that incorporate a communicative perspective are now available in the market.

Nevertheless, academic research (Anderson, 1993; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Chau & Chung, 1987; Rao, 2002) indicates that implementation of the CLT approach in China's EFL contexts seems to have a low rate of success. On the one hand, many students do not like the communicative-based language activities. They tend to prefer the traditional grammar-focused and reading-centered class work. Based on a survey of 30 Chinese

university students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in the English classroom, Rao (2002) concludes that his research subjects favored a variety of classroom activities, but they liked non-communicative activities more than communicative ones. On the other hand, many teachers felt discouraged with using CLT because of students' negative response as well as their own lack of knowledge of and training in CLT.

The difficulties and constraints perceived by EFL teachers and/or students with respect to employment of CLT in class are various. After doing a survey with 30 English major students at the university level and interviewing 10 of them, Rao (2002) summarizes the students' perceived difficulties in CLT settings as follows:

- 1) Students lack motivation for communicative competence, even though many are aware of its importance. This is because nearly all the language tests are grammar-focused.
- 2) Students are reluctant or feel difficult to accept the shift into a communicative approach, which is characterized by active interaction, because they have been accustomed to the traditional teacher-centered language teaching style after 12 years school education before entering a college or university.
- 3) EFL situations are big hindrance for CLT. Students in an EFL situation do not have as strong a motivation to learn English as those in an ESL setting, for whom CLT was originally designed. English does not play a very significant role in the political, economic and social life of EFL students, because English is not an official language,

nor do they have many opportunities outside class to interact with native English speakers. In addition, as EFL teachers are mostly Chinese, they have little experience and few authentic resources for CLT in the EFL context.

- 4) There is a serious lack of funding in most educational institutions for the provision of equipment such as TV sets and computers, which are necessary for communicative methods.

Similar to Rao, Burnaby and Sun (1989) list constraints of CLT in China as traditional teaching methods, English teachers' deficiencies in oral English and sociolinguistic and strategic competence and lack of resources and equipment. They also state that large class size and the low status of teachers who teach in a communicative way rather than by an analytical method can hinder the employment of CLT in China as well.

Anderson's (1993) study of CLT in China mentions another difficulty, apart from those relating to lack of properly trained CLT-oriented teachers, lack of real life textbooks and materials and students' not being accustomed to CLT. He states that EFL teachers usually find it hard to define standards for assessment on students with a communicative approach.

Based on a study that assessed Hong Kong EFL teachers' attitudes towards CLT, Chau & Chung (1987) reveal that many teachers use CLT very occasionally because they feel that CLT requires too much preparation time.

Studies by Li (1998) and Chen (2003) are also CLT related research. Li (1998) conducted a study on a group of South Korean secondary school English teachers to explore their perceived difficulties in adopting CLT. In his study, a questionnaire was first administered to 18 teachers and then an in-depth interview was done with 10 teachers who were selected by “maximum variation sampling”. Similar to Li’s research topic but different from his choice of research participants, Chen (2003) conducted a qualitative case study which examines 2 English-as-a-Second-Language undergraduate students’ experiences with CLT. One participant was from Japan and the other from Korea. Observation and in-depth interviewing were two major research strategies employed. Although the subjects in these two studies were from South Korea, Japan and Korea, research findings are mostly relevant and applicable to communicative language teaching situations in China, because many Asian EFL countries share some of the same characteristics of English teaching, such as traditional teaching methods and large class size.

In his study, Li (1998) reports a whole range of difficulties with respect to CLT when it is conducted in ESL/EFL teaching and learning contexts. He puts these difficulties under four categories:

- difficulties related to ESL/EFL teachers, such as their deficiency in spoken English, deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence, lack of training in CLT, few opportunities for retraining in CLT, misconceptions about CLT and little time and expertise for developing communicative materials;

- difficulties related to students, such as students' generally low English proficiency, lack of motivation for communicative competence and resistance to active participation in class activities;
- difficulties related to the educational system, such as grammar-based examinations, large classes, insufficient funding and lack of support for teachers;
- difficulties related to CLT itself, such as inadequate account of EFL teaching and lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments in CLT.

Chen's (2003) study reveals that Asian students' socio-cultural factors can contribute to their infrequent participation in an interactive communicative-based setting. Brought up and educated in competitive and exam-focused education systems with an emphasis on individual hard-working, Asian students have seldom been encouraged to make collaborative efforts to achieve academic goals and therefore they find it difficult to cope with an interactive constructivist class environment when CLT is employed.

The above literature demonstrates varied obstacles that CLT meets when being implemented in EFL countries like China, but these difficulties should not undermine the inherent advantages of CLT or intimidate educators to totally disregard CLT in EFL contexts. With regard to how to use CLT in EFL settings, Rao (2002) suggests that a reconciliation of communicative activities and non-communicative activities in China's English learning environment may be the best way to meet students' current needs. Rao further points out that in reconciling communicative activities with non-communicative activities, EFL teachers should not be biased towards either of them, but rather towards

integrating the two into one. Linguistic competence is the basis of communicative competence. The former ensures the correct manipulation of the language system whereas the latter assists language learners to appropriately use the target language in real life situations. Likewise, Li (1998) states that "...implementation [of CLT] should be gradual and grounded in the countries' own EFL situations" (p. 677). In the long run, researchers in EFL countries should develop English teaching theories more suitable for their contexts and use CLT in an adapted manner.

## **2.7 The Contribution of this Study**

The review of the literature has drawn attention to the existing research on communicative competence and the communicative language teaching approach in Asian countries, especially China. Definitions and characteristics of communicative competence and CLT have been reviewed. Advantages and disadvantages of CLT are illustrated. Since theories of communicative competence and CLT were originally created for ESL settings and further developed by western linguists and sociolinguists, there are not as many research studies on EFL in Asian countries, especially in China, as those studies on ESL. This study seeks to reveal how Chinese EFL teachers interpret communicative competence and CLT and how they practice it in class. A significant contribution of the present study is that the research data reflected how Chinese EFL teachers at the time of research interpret and understand communicative competence and CLT. The research findings added new problem-solving suggestions on how to use CLT effectively in China as well as confirmed certain statements and conclusions in the current literature.

Another important contribution of this study relates to its subject definition and selection. The participants involved in this study are/were Chinese EFL teachers at university level. The participants are characterized by “Chinese”, “EFL teachers” and “at university level”. This study explores teachers’ perceptions of CLT rather than students’ interpretations. Students were the informants in Rao’s (2002) and Chen’s (2003) studies. Also, the participants are Chinese whereas Li’s (1998) and Chen’s (2003) participants were from Japan, North Korea or South Korea. Additionally, contrary to Li’s participants who were secondary school teachers, the teachers in this study teach/taught at the university level.

The selection of participants differentiates this study from other existing ones as well. The nine interview subjects were chosen from six different universities which spread from northeast to the very south of China (Hong Kong), while many other studies selected their subjects from a particular school or university. Rao’s (2002) subjects were all from a normal university in the west of China and Chau and Chung’s (1998) informants were all from the same university in Hong Kong. Selection of subjects who cover wider geographical areas is likely to elicit comprehensive data and as a result, research findings are likely to provide a more holistic picture of the probed topic.

## **2.8 Summary**



This chapter has presented the review of the literature related to the social nature of language, the interpretations of communicative competence and the communicative language teaching approach, situations of the EFL education in China's higher education institutions and interpretations and practice of CLT in China's colleges and universities. The contribution of this study was discussed at the end.

Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology used in this study: reasons for sampling the interviewees, data collection strategies, data recording and managing methods, data analysis strategies and ethical issues involved in this study.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

Qualitative research methodology was employed in the present research. Qualitative/quantitative approaches to research differ in many respects. Both of them have their own strengths and weaknesses. One of the distinguishing strengths that qualitative inquiry fosters is its applicability for research “that is exploratory or descriptive, that assumes the value of context and setting, and that searches for a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 39). My decision to choose qualitative inquiry as the approach to the research can be understood in the light of my research questions, which are, in essence, descriptive and exploratory. Since the study is a naturalistic inquiry into how nine EFL teachers from six universities in China interpret and understand the communicative language teaching approach, the research questions seek to describe interpretations and understandings and to identify and discover what are behind the interpretations and understandings. Therefore, the design of the study can be described as inductive, generative, constructive and subjective. The research questions can best be addressed using an exploratory qualitative approach.

### **3.1 Rationale for Sampling**

The nine interviewees in this study were chosen from EFL teachers who are Chinese and who are currently or were in the past few years teaching English as a foreign language in a Chinese higher education institution. Efforts were made to try to select interviewees

from different universities as well as from different parts of China. The variety of choices of universities and the variety of locations of universities have the potential of providing wider perspectives on the research themes. The data collected by this approach was expected to be diverse, thick and rich, and to reveal a range of situations of China's EFL education. In Section 1.3, pseudonyms were given to the interviewed teachers. Lily, Tulip, Rose and Pine were chosen from University A which is located in the northeast of China, Carnation from University B which is also in the northeast, Primrose from University C which is in the north, Snowdrop from Institute D which is in central China, Lavender from University E which is in the southeast, and Daffodil from University F which is in Hong Kong.

### **3.2 Data Collection Strategies**

In this research, I appealed to in-depth interviewing and follow-up interviewing techniques to gather the data for the study.

#### **3.2.1 In-depth Interviewing**

In-depth interviewing is an effective way for researchers to look at issues through the eyes of their participants. It frequently performs as the overall data collection strategy employed by researchers in qualitative inquiries to quickly collect large amounts of information about interviewees' perspectives on events or phenomena under investigation. "The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a

framework within which respondents can express their understandings in their own terms” (Patton, 1983, p. 205, cited in Morse, 1994, p. 46).

A number of qualitative and ethnographic researchers have identified and distinguished interview questions in different ways. On considering the purposes of my research questions which explore understandings, experiences, opinions, facts and background information, I developed interview questions for this study primarily with reference to types of interview questions distinguished by Patton (1990). Patton categorizes interview questions as experience-behavior questions, opinion-value questions, probes of the interviewee’s feelings, requests for factual information, sensory types of questions, background-demographic queries and time-frame questions (cited in LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Morse, 1994).

The interview questions designed for this study are listed in the Interview Guide which is attached at the end of the thesis. They consist of ten questions altogether. Question 1 is a background-demographic query which aims to get background information about the interviewee and his/her institution. Question 2 which is further made up of a number of sub-questions is a type of opinion-value question which aims to elicit the teachers’ understandings and views of the CLT approach. Question 3 and Question 4 are requests for factual information: where the teachers’ understandings are from and how often they use CLT in their own teaching practice. The sub-question 4 in Question 5 and the sub-questions 1 and 2 in Question 7 are experience-behavior questions which expect the teachers to describe their experiences and behaviors of employing communicative-

oriented language activities or other teaching approach they use most often. All the other interview questions are in essence opinion-value questions – “why” questions or “what do you think” questions. These questions explore the deeper reasons for the teachers’ educational policies and practices.

In addition to consideration given to frame interview questions of different types, special attention was also given to the structure of the proposed questions in the interview guide. Endeavors were made to formulate interview questions in an open-ended way so that each of them has the potential of evoking a long narrative and elaboration from interviewees. This is because loosely structured questions permit respondents to relate more of what is important to them. The interview guide (see Appendix C) outlines general questions centered on the exploration of research questions. The final interview questions occasionally changed depending on the interviewee’s individual circumstances.

As qualitative researchers have the potential of influencing their participants and therefore the risk of changing the course of participants’ stories, I, as a researcher, sensitized myself to “guard [ing] against being a consultant, advice giver, or soothsayer” throughout each interview (Morse, 1994, p. 48). I verbalized to my participants openly before the interviews that my research purpose was to describe their perceptions, understandings and practice of the communicative language teaching approach rather than to modify their understandings and behaviors. I just performed as a catalyst to help my participants to put their thoughts into words. In sum, I was very careful in how to elicit information by asking them questions.

Explaining to interviewees that my role is neither judgmental nor therapeutic enhanced the trust and rapport between us, especially in the exploratory stage of interviewing. When rapport was established, meaningful conversations followed. To keep meaningful conversations going, I tried to develop and deploy necessary interpersonal skills, such as “skills of easily conversing with others, being an active and thoughtful listener, and having empathetic understanding of and a profound respect for the perspectives of others” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 65). I understood the necessity and significance of conveying an attitude of acceptance in the in-depth interviewing approach. What I tried to show to the interviewees was that I valued any of their responses provided. My close attention to their stories and honoring their words were indications of reciprocity of my research to them as well (Seidman, 1991).

Additionally, I made endeavors to minimize as much as possible the impact of my subjectivity by trying to get direct information from the interviewees on certain themes rather than making assumptions.

The in-depth interviewing was done in this study by three means: in person with two interviewees (Snowdrop and Daffodil), on the Internet with four interviewees (Lily, Tulip, Carnation and Lavender) and over the phone with three interviewees (Pine, Rose and Primrose). This way of doing the in-depth interviewing is mainly for the sake of convenience to me, the researcher. I am presently living in Northern Ireland, UK. It would be time-consuming and expensive if I traveled to China, Canada or the United

States to conduct face-to-face interviews with the selected teachers. Instead, it was quite convenient and cheap for me to do the interviews with two teachers face to face in Northern Ireland and with other teachers by means of phone or the Internet. Yahoo Messenger is the medium used in my interview conversations over the Internet with four teachers.

### **3.2.2 Follow-up Interviewing**

In-depth interviewing is a very useful way to gain rich and diverse data depending on face-to-face questioning of participants. It, however, may have limitations and weaknesses as well. On the part of interviewees, they may provide untrue or misleading information either unconsciously or consciously. On the part of the interviewer, he/she may fail to properly and exactly comprehend the interviewee's meanings. Dangers of distortion of facts and/or misperceptions and misinterpretations of meanings can be ameliorated through corroborating in-depth interviewing with follow-up interviewing. The follow-up interviewing, on the one hand, helped me to clarify with participants my understandings of their responses in the in-depth interviewing; on the other hand, it allowed participants themselves to "check" to see if my interpretations are correct, in their view. Hence, the follow-up interviewing helped to ensure research findings that truly reflect the ideas and thoughts of participants. Taking the forms of informal conversations either face to face, on the phone or via emails, the follow-up interviewing took place at stage 1 and stage 4 as described in Section 3.4.

### **3.3 Recording and Managing Data Methods**

Data collected via face to face interviews was audiotaped with a tape recorder (except some data obtained in the follow-up interviews, which was recorded on paper). Data collected via phone interviews was recorded on paper while the teachers were giving their answers to my interview questions, and typed and saved in files afterwards. Data obtained via Internet interviews was typed in Word files while the interviews were taken. I used Yahoo Messenger software to interview four teachers over the Internet. “Hand Free” function at Yahoo Messenger enabled me to free hands for typing what the teachers said while asking them questions with a microphone. I understood the pay-off of building habits for labeling audiotapes, carrying extra batteries and finding quiet places for note-taking and typing throughout and soon after interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Some of the interviewing information required translation into English. Interview languages used in the research were Chinese and English. The Chinese language, as the mother tongue of participants and myself, was used in order to gain optimal understanding between participants and me. During the interviews either through face to face, Internet or phone, whenever the teacher used the Chinese words to express what he/she meant, I usually translated the English words right away by asking “Do you mean ...?” so as to verify my translations.

### **3.4 Data Analysis Strategies**



Analyzing qualitative data is no easy task. To efficiently and effectively analyze, discuss, and explain voluminous data and subsequently to reach reliable and persuasive conclusions from the interview data, I drew upon suggestions on data analysis made by Burnard (1994) and Marshall & Rossman (1995). I constructed analytic procedures which are composed of six stages: preparing the text, developing a category or theme system, identifying meaning units and matching them to corresponding themes, testing validity of the matching, identifying patterns and searching for explanations, and writing up the report.

Stage 1: Preparing the text. This is a preliminary stage at which I transcribed the face to face interview data and input them into the computer. The interview data collected through the Internet and over the phone was edited and proofread at this stage as well. In editing the files, attention was given to leave wide margins around the text for notes and comments, and to add necessary labels to make notes retrievable. The follow-up interviews were done at this stage to clarify transcripts of information which may cause confusion.

Stage 2: Developing a category or theme system. Responses that participants offer in qualitative research can be categorized according to similarities and differences. At this stage, eleven themes and categories were determined on the basis of interview questions, each of which was focused on a particular point or issue. Literal categories and descriptive categories (Burnard, 1994) were both included in the list of themes. Literal categories refer to those that literally identify concrete contents of interviews, such as

definitions of terms. Descriptive categories aim to catch flavors of what a participant is saying, such as opinions on issues. The eleven themes are “definitions of the CLT approach by the teachers in this study”, “the teachers’ understandings of typical characteristics of the CLT approach”, “the teachers’ understandings of advantages of the CLT approach”, “the teachers’ understandings of limitations of the CLT approach”, “the teachers’ descriptions of how the CLT approach has ever been reflected in their classes”, “sources of the teachers’ understandings of the CLT approach”, “the frequency of and reasons for the teachers’ employment of the CLT approach in class”, “general perceptions of the CLT approach in the institutes of the interviewed teachers”, “the teachers’ opinions on whether the CLT approach is applicable for China’s general EFL education context”, “teaching approaches used most often by the teachers in this study”, and “the teachers’ understandings of the best teaching approach conducive to development of Chinese EFL students’ communicative competence”.

Stage 3: Identifying meaning units and matching them to corresponding themes. Following Mostyn’s explanation (1985), Burnard defines a meaning unit as “a discrete phrase, sentence or series of sentences which conveys one idea or one related set of perceptions” (1994, p. 113). At this stage, endeavors were made to divide the text up into a number of meaningful blocks. These blocks were then put under the corresponding categories which they are most closely related to.

Stage 4: Testing validity of the matching. To ensure the validity of my matching meaning units with corresponding categories or themes, I came back to my participants and

checked with them whether my matching reflected their intentions. This process forms a part of my follow-up interviews as well.

Stage 5: Identifying patterns and searching for explanations. We know that patterns occur when a variety of meaning units are grouped together under a shared category. At this stage, efforts were invested to summarize and to describe each pattern revealed in a group of meaning units listed under the same category. Moreover, I linked related patterns together by their relationships. My work at this stage was not limited at the level of simple description. I also made comparison and contrast between the findings from this study and findings obtained from other research studies and related literature, exploring any possible explanations for patterns and offering suggestions for the significance of patterns as well.

Stage 6: Writing up the report. The final stage is to write up the report. At this stage, I was cautious about the choice of particular words to summarize, reflect and interpret the complexity of data collected. In light of the methods of sampling (non-random sampling) and the small size of samples (nine interviewees altogether), I didn't attempt to generalize my findings to a great extent.

### **3.5 Ethical Issues**

Marshall and Rossman (1995) argue that successful qualitative researchers should be sensitive to ethical issues that might be present when engaging in a moral act. Ethical

problems in this study were reduced to a minimum in three ways – overtly exposing to participants the purpose of the study, advocating voluntary participation with informed consent forms, and protecting anonymity of participants throughout the thesis.

A researcher's role may vary as to the extent to which the researcher reveals his/her research purpose to participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In my study, I overtly informed my participants of the purpose of my conducting the research with them, what my interests were, how they were expected to engage in this study and what the possible uses of all the information to be collected were (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The participants were then given consent forms. Their participation started after they signed the consent forms. In this way, they were aware of my overt role as a researcher. Overt information and voluntary participation are helpful in building a trusting and respecting relationship between the researcher and the researched.

I admit that my interviews with participants could, to a certain extent, disrupt their everyday life. Nonetheless, I didn't see that my intervention put my participants in danger of any kind or violated their human rights in some way. Additionally, I undertake to keep all the information confidential and ensure that my participants and their students are unidentifiable throughout my thesis. In other words, they are very safe with this study.

### **3.6 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 will adopt the data analysis strategies described in Section 3.4, present some of the typical interview quotations, discuss research findings under eleven themes and make conclusions of the findings.

## **Chapter 4 Research Findings**

In this chapter, the interview data collected from the nine interviews is analyzed and discussed in the context of the literature. Conclusions are based on the research data in this study and the literature. The data analysis is organized under eleven different themes: 1) definitions of the CLT approach by the teachers in this study, 2) the teachers' understandings of typical characteristics of the CLT approach, 3) the teachers' understandings of the advantages of the CLT approach, 4) the teachers' understandings of the limitations of the CLT approach, 5) the teachers' descriptions of how the CLT approach has been reflected in their classes, 6) sources of the teachers' understandings, 7) frequency of and reasons for the teachers' employment of the CLT approach in class, 8) general perceptions of the CLT approach in the institutions of the interviewed teachers, 9) the teachers' opinions on whether the CLT approach is applicable for China's general EFL education context, 10) teaching approaches used most often by teachers in this study and 11) the teachers' opinions of the best teaching approach(es) conducive to the development of Chinese EFL students' communicative competence. When the interview data is presented in the following sections, pseudonyms Lily, Tulip, Rose, Pine, Carnation, Primrose, Snowdrop, Lavender and Daffodil will be used.

### **4.1 Definitions of the CLT Approach by the Teachers in this Study**

#### **4.1.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

In defining the concept of “the communicative language teaching approach” (the CLT approach), most teachers interviewed in this study stated that it is an approach to foreign or second language teaching with the emphasis on the development of learners’ communicative competence rather than learners’ mastery of discrete language skills, such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Pine gave a fairly comprehensive definition of the CLT approach. He said,

“It is an approach to foreign or second language teaching (but mainly to SLT). It emphasizes that the goal of language teaching is to develop the students’ communicative competence, i.e., the actual use of the target language in real life or in various socio-cultural contexts, including correct or appropriate language production, understanding and interpretation of various well-formed linguistic forms. Language learners should learn where, when, what, how and to whom to speak. Communicative competence or the actual use of the target language is strongly emphasized in CLT” (16 March 2003, No. 1 in Question 2).

Pine’s perceptions of the CLT approach are very much in line with Hymes’ (1972a) and Lyons’ (1970) interpretations, whose central theme is “the appropriate language use in specific social and cultural contexts”. Pine stated that language learners should be aware of “where, when, what, how and to whom to speak”. “Where, when, what, how and to whom to speak” reflects the appropriate use of the target language in specific cultural situations.

Similar to Pine, Lily interpreted the CLT approach as “a teaching methodology which emphasizes the real use of language in daily life situations and helps learners to develop their communicative skills”. Daffodil also said that “Communicative language teaching

approach means that when I prepare my teaching material or plan my teaching, I will set more realistic situations so that students can use the language to communicate with people. For example, I may take students to McDonald's to teach them how to use 'Can I' and 'May I'. Students can use the target language in real life situations".

#### **4.1.2 Discussion of Findings**

Although most teachers in this study used the expressions "communicative proficiency", "communicative competence", "communicative skills" or "communicative functions" when they defined the term CLT, only three teachers Pine, Lily and Daffodil put an emphasis on language use in real life situations whereas the remaining six teachers seemed to interpret communicative competence in a narrow sense. Many of them perceived communicative skills as only the ability to "get ideas across" (Tulip) and to understand others. In their opinions, listening and speaking skills are the most prominent components of communicative skills (Lavender). Language "fluency" is more important than other language capabilities (Rose). These understandings of the communicative language teaching approach are of limited scope, because they neglect social and cultural aspects of communicative competence, which are at least equally or even more important than the fluency aspects. What Hymes (1972a) argues for appropriateness of language use is concerned with how to use the language properly in particular social and cultural contexts. In present literature, there are some discussions of misconceptions of CLT by Asian EFL teachers (Li, 1998) and students (Rao, 2002), but these discussions are mainly related to teachers' and students' misinterpretation of grammar instruction in



communicative teaching. Discussions of teachers' overemphasis on listening and speaking skills and overlooking of social and cultural aspects are hardly found in the current literature.

## **4.2 The Teachers' Understandings of Typical Characteristics of the CLT Approach**

### **4.2.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

The summary of how the teachers in this study comprehended the typical features of the communicative language teaching methodology is listed below.

Lily, Tulip, Rose, Pine, Carnation and Snowdrop stated that CLT is communication-oriented. The focus of CLT is on the development of students' communicative competence. Typical quotations are,

“Teaching-goal is focused on how to develop learners' actual communicative competence” (Pine, 16 March 2003).

“It is helpful to develop students' communicative skills” (Snowdrop, 19 March 2003).

“The emphasis is on the development of learners' listening and speaking skills” (Lily, 13 March 2003).

Lily, Tulip, Pine, Carnation, Primrose and Daffodil said that CLT is learner-centered and it involves meaningful interactive language activities and tasks. CLT encourages learners'

full participation. The teacher's role is to guide and facilitate rather than lecture. Typical quotations are,

“I view the typical characteristics of this pedagogy include student's full participation and teacher's roll as a guide rather than a lecturer” (Primrose, 18 March 2003.)

“Emphasize real life situations or authentic situations when students use the language features” (Daffodil, 21 March 2003).

“Cooperative learning (pairs or groups of learners, learners and teachers in classroom)” (Pine, 16 March 2003).

Pine and Daffodil stated that CLT emphasizes socio-cultural knowledge teaching. Situational or contextual aspects of language teaching are emphasized.

Lily, Snowdrop and Lavender stated that CLT is not only instruction-oriented, but fun-oriented. It puts an emphasis on learners' study motivation. Learners' study interest should be encouraged.

#### **4.2.2 Discussion of Findings**

The teachers' discussions of the typical characteristics of the CLT approach comply with the CLT features reflected in the literature (Li 1998 and Ramirez 1995). The literature and this research both show that the CLT approach is characterized by focuses on communicative functions, meaningful interactive language activities and tasks, and stimulation of learners' study interest.

In spite of the common points found, one gap between the literature and the research findings in this study, in relation to the key features of CLT, is that none of the teachers in this research mentioned the importance of using authentic teaching and learning materials, while both Li (1998) and Ramirez (1995) include the usage of authentic, from-life material as a main characteristic of communicative language instruction. As well, only two teachers (Pine and Daffodil) in this study explicitly stated real life situations and socio-cultural knowledge teaching as a typical feature of CLT. On 25 March 2004, I made two phone calls to Snowdrop and Primrose respectively, asking reasons for their not commenting on authentic material when they answered the interview question 2. Both of them commented that they didn't mention authentic materials because authentic teaching and learning materials are scarce in China and it is very expensive to buy authentic textbooks. The research finding "lack of and high cost of authentic materials in China's EFL contexts" confirms the same conclusion in the current literature (Rao, 2002; Li, 1998; Chen, 2003; Anderson, 1993).

### **4.3 The Teachers' Understandings of Advantages of the CLT Approach**

#### **4.3.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

When asked the advantages of the communicative language teaching approach in second/foreign language education, the interviewed teachers listed a range of benefits.

- It encourages learners to be actively involved in the learning process, keeping them highly motivated (Lily, Tulip, Primrose and Daffodil).
- It helps learners learn the authentic use of language, to develop their ability to use the target language in the real world communicative context. For example, learners are able to learn to use the target language as a means of expression of values and judgments (Lily, Rose and Lavender).
- By this approach, learners are provided chances to speak and to practice what they have learned so far (Carnation, Primrose and Snowdrop).
- It helps learners learn not only the linguistic forms of the language per se but also communicative functions of the language (Lily and Lavender).
- Learners' communicative competence is clearly oriented and emphasized (Pine).
- This approach can create various socio-cultural situations, in which learners can easily gain cultural knowledge. Such knowledge is very helpful to develop communicative competence (Pine).
- It helps learners learn the target language in a more natural way, like language acquisition (Daffodil).

“If CLT is used, students will learn the target language in a more natural way, like language acquisition. In communicating, students will be able to memorise the language more. If I use the CLT, I will not explain the grammar rules, so the students just learn naturally, more like language acquisition” (Daffodil, 21 March 2003, Question 2).

- Learner-centered class or situation is provided or promoted (Pine).
- A harmonious and carefree atmosphere is available in a communicative-based class, in which learners feel free and willing to talk with each other (Pine).

### **4.3.2 Discussion of Findings**

From the interviewed teachers' points of view, the communicative language teaching approach is conducive to developing learners' communicative competence, making the second/foreign language learning process more like first language acquisition, creating a friendly and carefree learning environment and motivating learners' study interest. The teachers' perceptions of the advantages of the CLT approach are very much in accordance with the features of this teaching methodology defined by Li (1998) and Ramirez (1995). Both Li and Ramirez outline the key features of CLT as its focus on communicative functions, its attempt to create a secure and non-threatening atmosphere and its stress on keeping learners motivated.

## **4.4 The Teachers' Understandings of Limitations of the CLT Approach**

### **4.4.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

The limitations of the CLT approach proposed by the interviewed teachers are various, including:

- 1) Applying this approach is difficult in non-English speaking countries, particularly in Asian countries like China, since no real socio-cultural environments are available. Lily, Pine and Daffodil stated that, due to the differences between western cultures and eastern cultures, it can be very difficult for EFL teachers to organize real communicative activities in English class. Lily said,

“Sometimes it is very difficult to organize real communicative activities in the classes of China because of the cultural difference. For example, it is difficult for Chinese students to talk about western food if they have never tasted it or been to an English speaking country before. For another example, it is not easy for Chinese students to role play a Halloween Party because China does not have Halloween festival” (13 March 2003, No. 5 in Question 2).

- 2) Rose and Daffodil stated that this approach is difficult for ESL/EFL education for beginners, because it requires learners’ basic linguistic knowledge of the target language to ensure progress in communication and completion of tasks. Daffodil said,

“The students need to have the basic knowledge of the target language if CLT approach is used; otherwise, communication can’t go on and tasks can’t be done. Or students may have to use their mother tongue occasionally when the target language is mainly used in communication” (21 March 2003, No 5 in Question 2).

- 3) Tulip and Lavender thought that with this approach, learners may not be strongly grounded in grammatical skills since the teaching emphasis is put on communicative competence.
- 4) Pine and Carnation commented that with this approach, it is hard to provide examinations, the standards and instruments of how to assess learners’ learning outcomes. Learners may be weak in doing examinations.
- 5) Primrose stated that with this approach, it can be difficult for teachers to control what is going on in the class, because students can be diverted to discussions of other topics instead of the designated one, either consciously or unconsciously.
- 6) Snowdrop proposed “time limit” as a limitation of CLT. She commented,

“The time limit. One class takes 45 minutes. If we have 25 students in the class which is common for an EFL class size at the university level, not everybody can have enough time or opportunities to speak. If all want to say something, you need to have plenty of time. Also, when students are divided into several groups, I feel I can’t give enough supervision for each of the groups because of the time limit” (19 March 2003, No. 5 in Question 2).

Snowdrop’s comments reflect that China’s EFL class size is commonly large (25 students) and therefore the large class size can be a constraint for employing CLT.

#### **4.4.2 Discussion of Findings**

In relation to limitations of the CLT approach itself, the findings from the interview data indicate that this teaching pedagogy entails difficulties when applied to EFL countries where great discrepancies between the host culture and the target culture exist, difficulties when applied to ESL/EFL education for pure beginners, difficulties in strengthening learners’ grammatical skills, difficulties in appropriately evaluating learners, and difficulties in adequately controlling classes and providing sufficient supervision for each learner if the class size is big.

Limitations of CLT cited by the teachers in this study confirm the current literature. Since CLT is originally created for ESL contexts, it can be very difficult for EFL teachers to orient their EFL students to real English-cultured language activities (Rao, 2002). If students and/or teachers have never experienced authentic English cultures, how can they be expected to adequately play real situational language activities? In addition, both the

current literature (Anderson, 1993; Li, 1998) and this study agree about CLT's difficulty in evaluating learners.

When the teachers answer the question concerning limitations of CLT, they seem to have made two assumptions about language teaching and learning.

First, two teachers commented that students may not be able to be grounded in grammatical skills with CLT. Another teacher said that, "For foreign language teaching, especially for beginners, grammar and vocabulary should receive attention." These teachers seem to assume that grammatical competence is very important in English language learning, especially for pure beginners. This assumption reflects certain aspects of the current education system in China. Because most English exams are state-controlled and grammar-focused, teachers regard it as necessary to stress developing students' grammatical skills.

Second, two teachers stated that CLT makes it difficult for teachers to control a class as well as to provide sufficient supervision of each student. One teacher said "I think the limitation lies mainly in the occasional difficulty to control what's going on in the class". Another teacher says "when students are divided into several groups, I feel I can't give enough supervision for each of the groups because of the time limit [45 minutes in each class]". These two teachers seem to assume that it is very important for teachers to take the leading role to control a class and to give enough supervision for each student. This belief can result in a teacher-dominated class.



## **4.5 The Teachers' Descriptions of How the CLT Approach has been Reflected in their Classes**

### **4.5.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

In relation to the issue of what, in the teachers' opinions, a communicative-oriented class should look like (No. 3 in Question 2), the teachers interviewed in this research made statements like the following,

Students are the center and teachers are facilitators. Teachers mainly play the role of supervision. Students should be actively involved in speaking activities without being concerned about any grammatical mistakes they may make, thus gradually gaining confidence in practicing the target language. There should be lots of interactions between students and students and/or students and teachers.

When being asked, in the fourth sub-question in Question 5, what kinds of language activities have been typically organized in their communicative-based class, the teachers gave examples of role-play, games, discussion around given topics, music, drama, storytelling and use of computer and Internet. The following are the teachers' descriptions of how these language activities may be typically carried on in class.

#### *Role-play*

Four teachers talked about role-plays. Lily in her interview said that, with role-play, the teacher first gives students a hand out, say, a scenario of two friends meeting at the supermarket and then asks students to role-play the scenario. Students are divided into a

few groups. Three students may be put in each group – two friends and a shop assistant. They may say whatever they can imagine of a supermarket in their mind but they are required to use a few sentence patterns, such as “I am glad to see you.”, “How have you been recently?” and “What can I do for you?” The teacher usually expects them to form long conversations.

Likewise, Pine described a role-play as,

“First, I offered my students as much as possible cultural information relevant to the subject (such as family invitation) to be discussed in class. Then I divided my students into 5 groups to have a talk or discussion of the subject. Finally I asked them to play the roles of guests and hostesses” (16 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 5).

### *Story-telling*

Four teachers cited story-telling as a most commonly used language activity in a communicative-based class. Carnation stated that,

“Before my class, I will use a tape recorder playing a short story. Students listen to the tape, take notes, repeat the words, and understand the content. Then I raise my questions and ask them discuss the questions in groups and get the answers. Of course, I will help them in catching the key words while listening. Students continue to ask questions and they understand all I hope they should. Finally they retell the story each other. Every student must be involved in it” (17 March 2003, No. 4 in Question 5).

One teacher said that story-telling activities with the aid of a tape recorder are good means for students to practice their listening and speaking skills as well.

### *Discussion*

Three teachers talked about the usage of discussion as a communicative-oriented language activity. With discussion activities, Tulip, Rose and Snowdrop said that students are divided into small groups and each group is given a certain topic for discussion. “Must” information, which is the linguistic forms that the teacher expects students to grasp, is provided. In the definite time, students are encouraged to talk as much as possible around the topic and to use the ‘must’ information and then to make a final conclusion. At the end, the whole group or a representative will present their conclusion in front of the class. Debates may also be arranged to see which group is more convincing.

### *Music*

Only one teacher “Snowdrop” talked about song enjoyment in a communicative-based class. She said, “...ask students to listen to English songs and ask them to write down all the words while listening. I then will check whether the words are correct or not” (19 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 5).

### *Drama*

Two teachers listed drama as a communicative-oriented language activity. Primrose stated that she arranged students to prepare for a situational drama using the information

and language points provided by the textbook. Some simple stage properties may be used. From drama activities, the teacher expects students to grasp linguistic items as well as to become more confident in the actual communication.

### *Use of Computer and Internet*

Two teachers talked about using the CLT approach in a computer-assisted environment. Lavender said that she organized computer simulation activities in her “Oral Practice” class. She described,

“I employed this approach in a computer-assisted environment. I used some computer simulation activities in students’ ‘Oral Practice’ course. Students were first assigned a discussion topic to prepare for the next class, say, about their hometowns. In the next class, they were required to show to the class their hometowns they may have painted on the computer with whatever software, say Paint, and then to talk about the assigned topic of hometown with the assistance of the pictures they have drawn” (20 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 5).

Daffodil stated that she used the Internet in her communicative-based class, requiring students to search from the Internet the information related to a certain discussion topic, which was mostly about “the natural environment”. She said,

“Based on the topic from a textbook, I would ask them to search things related. Because the textbook is Hong Kong based, it tells things about Hong Kong environment. I may ask students to search agricultural and fishery department” (21 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 5).

### *Games*

Four teachers mentioned games when they listed communicative-oriented language activities. Since the interview question 5 asked them to describe in detail one example of a communicative-based language activity, they all chose other activities. Therefore, there is no elaboration of games from the data collected.

#### **4.5.2 Discussion of Findings**

The interview data revealed that, no matter what form of language activities are used in a communicative-based class, their main purposes are to keep students motivated in subject matters, to stimulate students to speak and to enlarge students' vocabulary. In addition, two teachers mentioned that, from computer-aided language activities, students are also provided with opportunities to learn knowledge of how to use certain computer software and how to surf the web sites.

Most teachers indicated that the majority of students show enthusiasm for participation in communicative-oriented activities whereas Lily said "But usually, they [students] seem not to have much to say after they have used the required sentence patterns" (13 March 2003, No. 4 in Question 5).

From the interview data concerning the teachers' understandings of what a communicative-oriented class should look like (Question 2) and what strategies, activities and materials they have normally used in their communicative-oriented class (Question 5), I conclude the following.

Firstly, role-plays, story-telling, discussions and games are the most commonly used forms of communicative-oriented language activities. Role-plays may be mostly related to social settings like party invitations and supermarket scenarios. Stories and discussion topics are mainly around what is happening or has happened in students' life.

Secondly, no matter what language activities are used, quite a few teachers stressed incorporation of required linguistic forms and sentence patterns in activities.

“They may say whatever they can imagine but they are required to use three sentence patterns – ‘I am glad to see you.’, ‘How have you been recently?’ and ‘What can I do for you?’” (Lily, 13 March 2003, No. 4 in Question 5).

“One way to use this approach is to have a topic (preferably interesting), provide ‘must’ information which is linguistic forms and drills and ask students to be involved in dialogue or a conversation, story telling, or other types of presentation” (Rose, 15 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 5).

“For example, I arrange students to prepare for a situational drama using the information and language points provided by the textbook. ... I expect my students to grasp the language usage and become more confident in their capabilities” (Primrose, 18 March 2003, No. 4 in Question 5).

“I organise students into smaller groups and let them talk about something. Each group may be given a certain topic. They are required to use certain linguistic forms” (Snowdrop, 19 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 5).

The teachers' integration of linguistic drills into the communicative language activities shows that the key reasons for their using language activities are two-fold: to enhance students' speaking and listening skills (a component of communicative competence) as well as to strengthen students' grammatical abilities. The teachers' emphasis on the linguistic aspects of the communicative language activities, to a certain degree, reveals their limited understanding of CLT, because activities with required sentence patterns,

strictly speaking, are not communicative. In a strict sense, communicative activities do not emphasize mastery of linguistic element; rather, they aim at developing learners' communicative skills. On the other hand, the teachers' stress on grammar reflects the weight and significance of grammar teaching in the curriculum design of English education, which confirms the point that grammar-focused education is still a reality in China (Rao, 2002).

#### **4.6 Sources of the Teachers' Understandings of the CLT Approach**

The interview data from Question 3 shows that the understandings and perceptions of the CLT approach revealed by the teachers in this study mainly originate from two sources: courses taken at advanced level education and independent reading of academic literature. Three teachers attributed their understandings to both knowledge obtained in advanced education at universities, either at undergraduate level or graduate level, and knowledge acquired when they read related academic literature independently. Four teachers explained that their understandings were solely retrieved from courses taken at the universities. Two teachers said that their understandings were simply from reading academic literature on their own.

The teachers also indicated that when they were taught knowledge about CLT at universities, that knowledge was passed to them only in a general sense. It was not taught particularly for the purpose of their future teaching career, because the major "English Linguistics and Literature" provided in Chinese universities (except normal universities

which train future teachers) aims to train English specialists with competent oral and written skills, not for teacher training purposes, although some graduates may enter into teaching profession upon graduation, like the teachers in this study. Therefore, no teacher chose B "taught in teachers' training classes" in Question 3 when they were asked to indicate the source of their CLT understandings. A conclusion can be made here that no teacher in this study has received communicatively oriented teacher training programs. In addition, no teacher indicated that their CLT knowledge was acquired from attending academic conferences (choice d in Question 3). All these imply that, in EFL education in China, there is a shortage of academic conferences on the communicative language teaching approach, and a deficiency of EFL teacher training programs focusing on equipping or refreshing teachers with CLT knowledge.

#### **4.7 The Frequency of and Reasons for the Teachers' Employment of the CLT Approach in Class**

##### **4.7.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

In answering Question 4, two of the nine interviewed teachers indicated that they practiced CLT "very occasionally", four "once in a while" and three "often". In terms of proportion, around 33% of the teachers used the CLT approach often whereas the other 66% did not. Thus, the majority of the teachers in this research do not or did not use CLT in a high frequency.



In the first sub-question of Question 5, the teachers were asked the reasons for using CLT in their teaching practice. Lily said that she used CLT only a few times in an attempt to try a different teaching method (she usually used the traditional grammar translation and audio-lingual methods). Pine said that he chose to use the CLT approach in his class on one occasion just for an experiment. He said,

“I once chose to employ the CLT approach just for experiment, i.e., for test and verification of the theory of communicative competence. I wanted to testify whether and how this approach is practical and feasible in teaching linguistics, English writing or translation. I don't think this approach is very applicable to the EFL education in China” (16 March 2003, No. 1 in Question 5).

Except the above two teachers, all the other seven teachers expressed a common motive for their choice of CLT: to inspire students and to liven up the class. They stated that CLT is very stimulating, which motivates students to actively participate in class activities.

#### **4.7.2 Discussion of Findings**

Analysing the interview data, I found that the predominant reason for most of the teachers in this study to use the CLT approach is to motivate students. This reason does not seem to comply with the prominent advantage that the CLT approach is supposed to achieve, which is to enhance learners' communicative skills. Therefore, I tend to conclude that most teachers in this study are not fully aware of the main potential benefits of the CLT approach. They ignore central aspects of the CLT approach: realistic communication and cultural awareness. This is exactly reflected in Section 4.5 as well.

Even though two teachers talked about using computer software and the Internet in their communicative class, they didn't name any cultural awareness materials. They don't seem to be aware of the wealth of cultural enrichment materials available through the Internet, videos, etc.

#### **4.8 General Perceptions of the CLT Approach in the Institutions of the Interviewed Teachers**

Regarding the issue of how the communicative language teaching approach is generally perceived in their institutes, all teachers unanimously indicated that in reality this approach is not a dominant teaching methodology. Most of their colleagues and they themselves don't use this approach very often, due to a variety of constraints (the constraints will be summarized below in Section 4.9). Two typical quotations are,

“It is highly perceived and acknowledged but not widely used” (Pine, 16 March 2003, Question 9).

“Many of the teaching staff regards it as a useful tool to make class more active and attractive. But because of the teaching requirements (curriculum requirement which emphasize grammar teaching), they may not use this approach very often” (Primrose, 18 March 2003, Question 9).

The interview data also reflects an interesting point – young teachers, foreign teachers and teachers who teach the course of “Oral English” tend to use the CLT approach.

“Elderly people prefer the traditional ways of teaching whereas the young people may like CLT. Personally, I am young and a sort of fun-loving person. I like to use CLT to make classes more lively and creative” (Snowdrop, 19 March 2003, Question 9).

“Most teachers in my department don’t use it often, but many foreign teachers use it often in their class. They usually teach oral English” (Carnation, 17 March 2003, Question 9).

“Teachers offering courses of English Conversation and English Listening are encouraged to use it. CLT is the most effective approach for communicative skills anyway” (Tulip, 14 March 2003, Question 9).

All the teachers said that CLT is not the main teaching methodology used in their institutes, but the interview data indicated that many teachers do think it a useful approach to develop students’ communicative skills and therefore this approach is highly perceived. Foreign teachers and teachers who offer the “Oral English” course use it relatively often. This finding is different from the statement made by Burnaby and Sun (1989) and the conclusion that Li (1998) makes in his discussion of difficulties of CLT. Burnaby and Sun suggest that “teaching English at the tertiary level (grammar, literature, and linguistic analysis) carries greater prestige than teaching students to speak the language for real communicative purposes” (1989, p. 223). Similarly, as discussed in Section 2.6, Li concludes that one constraint on CLT is the low status of teachers who teach communicative rather than analytical skills. The finding that the teachers do seem to see CLT as something desirable updates earlier studies by Li and Burnaby & Sun. Teachers’ attitudes towards CLT seem to have changed in this regard and become more positive, but there is still a lack of training and support for CLT.

#### **4.9 The Teachers’ Opinions on whether the CLT Approach is Applicable for China’s General EFL Education Context**

##### **4.9.1 Arguments against Applicability of CLT in China**

Two teachers clearly and explicitly responded “no” when they were asked in Question 8 whether they think CLT is very suitable for China’s broad and general EFL education backgrounds. They listed a number of constraints that can be encountered in EFL classes in China to support their arguments. A few other teachers implied some other difficulties related to this issue when they responded to other interview questions. These constraints and difficulties are summarized below.

- 1) It is difficult to organize real communicative-oriented language activities in China’s EFL classes. There are no authentic socio-cultural environments necessary for CLT classes due to the conspicuous differences between western and eastern cultures. Lily raised an example,

“Some communicative activities are not real in the Chinese classrooms. For example, I once organized students to do role-plays in which two friends met at a pub. Students felt difficult to imagine what could be going on in a pub, because in most middle-sized cities and small cities in China, we don’t have pubs. While pubs are so common in the western world, they are not part of typical Chinese cultures” (13 March 2003, Question 8).

- 2) There is a shortage of qualified EFL teachers who are capable of effectively employing the CLT approach. In China, it is a fact that most EFL teachers themselves are not equipped with adequate and correct knowledge and information of the communicative oriented teaching methodology. Pine said,

“Most EFL teachers at the university level are postgraduates. Many of them have not received any teaching training before they start their career” (16 March 2003, Question 8).

Similarly, Lily said in Question 2,

“It is a big challenge for the teachers who are not native speakers of English. They themselves, in the first place, need to be familiar with this approach, but more often than not, they don’t know much of this teaching approach” (13 March 2003).

- 3) It is difficult to abandon traditional English language teaching concepts, methods and material, which are centered on translation and repetition. It is equally difficult to develop totally new communication-based teaching principles, material and facilities. Educational revolution takes time and funds.
- 4) It is difficult to get authentic teaching and learning material. Lily indicated that although the Internet is increasingly becoming the easiest means to access the most up-to-date information provided in the English language, it is unfortunately not widespread or accessible in most of China’s EFL classes.
- 5) The large size of China’s EFL classes also hinders the effective implementation of the CLT approach. Snowdrop commented that the CLT approach is more appropriate for classes of small size so that the teacher can provide sufficient supervision over each of the students in their language activities. However, since it is quite normal that an English major class consists of 25 to 30 students and a public English class has 30 to 50 students, it is not easy to give each student enough supervision in a class of 45 minutes.

In summary, from the teachers’ perspectives, the difficulties that hinder the effective application of the CLT approach in China’s EFL context are primarily related to access to qualified CLT-oriented EFL teachers, access to authentic teaching materials,

transformation of traditional teaching theories and materials to communication-oriented ones, organization of authentic communicative-based language activities in a Chinese cultural background, and the large class size. These difficulties are mostly the same as those identified in the literature review Section 2.5 and Section 2.6, which revealed the difficulties of CLT with respect to lack of qualified CLT teachers, lack of authentic resources, traditional teaching style and materials and large class size, etc. (Anderson, 1993; Li, 1998; Lin, 2002; Rao, 2002). In particular, Pine said that the majority of EFL university level teachers are young postgraduates. His statement exactly confirms what Lin (2002) said. There is only one point which seems to be emphasized by the teachers in this study but discussed less in the present literature. In this study, the teachers emphasized that because of the cultural differences, it is difficult for them to organize real, from-life communicative activities. They put a stress on the difficulty caused by the cultural differences. They suggest that when students have no experience of, or even have never heard of western cultural things, like pubs or Halloween Party, they will certainly find it difficult to be meaningfully involved in those activities. Cultural differences lead to difficulties in organizing real communicative events in Chinese EFL classes.

#### **4.9.2 Arguments for Applicability of CLT in China**

In contrast to the above views, six teachers listed the following reasons in support of their positive response to whether the CLT approach is applicable to China's EFL education contexts.

- 1) Carnation, Primrose and Lavender stated that with China's Open and Reform Policy implemented in the 1980s, Chinese people have more opportunities to interact with English speaking people through cultural exchange programs, international trade and tourism. They came to realize the significance of English language learning as a tool of communication. People's communicative abilities are on many occasions essential. The CLT approach is at present the most effective teaching methodology that helps students develop communicative skills. Carnation stated,

“Yes. China started its Open and Reform Policy since 1980s. Chinese people focus their efforts on Modernization. They opened the gate of China to welcome western people to come in and to send Chinese people to visit developed countries to learn their advanced technology. So Chinese people have more opportunities to interact with English-speaking people. We have realized the importance of real communicative skills of English. CLT at present is a well recognized teaching approach to developing learners' communicative competence, so it should be used in teaching English in China” (17 March 2003, Question 8).

- 2) Snowdrop and Daffodil argued that CLT is useful to stimulate Chinese students to practice English orally so as to avoid the “Dumb English”. Many Chinese students are shy and quiet, partly because of Chinese culture. Communicative-based interactive language activities can encourage them to speak with the target language and to increase their confidence. Snowdrop said,

“I think it is applicable. Many Chinese students are very shy. It is just a fact. Even though some of them have excellent reading and writing abilities, they don't speak much with the target language. This results in “Dumb English”. We need to encourage them and to stimulate them to speak. CLT provides chances to encourage students to speak” (19 March 2003, Question 8).

- 3) Rose argued that China needs CLT because of the world wide educational reform in second/foreign language teaching. She explained that the CLT approach complies with the tremendous world wide shift, which happened after the 1980s, of the focus of the foreign language education from mastery of discrete language skills to the development of communicative skills. The great shift of foreign language education is also in accordance with the larger shift of education that has flowed from positivism to post-positivism and from behaviorism to cognitivism. China should be no exception in making efforts to adopt the CLT approach in this world wide educational reform.
- 4) Daffodil stated that the CLT approach is applicable to EFL education in Hong Kong, since there is easier access there to authentic English language learning resources due to Hong Kong's special history and geography. Daffodil said,

“Hong Kong is okay. We have plenty of resources for students to practice their English. If they really like, they can go to some areas to talk with foreigners, not only in McDonald's. We also have some foreign teachers” (21 March 2003, Question 8).

In summary, there are six teachers who stated that CLT can be applied to China's EFL education contexts. One teacher from Hong Kong argued that, because of easy access to plenty of authentic language teaching and learning resources in Hong Kong, it can be easier to adopt the CLT approach in Hong Kong's EFL classes. The other teachers argue for the need of the CLT approach on the grounds of China's Open and Reform Policy and the worldwide trend of placing more emphasis on developing learners' communicative skills in the foreign language education field. Two teachers share a common opinion in one benefit of the CLT approach: it helps some Chinese students to overcome their



shyness and to improve their confidence. The interview data revealed that there is a very strong need for CLT in present China. Many Chinese English learners have been aware of the significance of being able to communicate effectively with the target language as well as the usefulness of CLT to help them reach their goals. But unfortunately the teachers in this study did not explain or discuss how CLT can be effectively applied in China. The issue of how CLT can be effectively applied in China is a big topic. This issue will be discussed in Section 4.11 and Section 4.12 in light of interview data collected from Interview Question 10.

#### **4.10 Teaching Methods Used Most Often by the Teachers in this Study**

##### **4.10.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

The interview data collected from interview Question 7 indicate that the teaching methods that have been most often used by the teachers in this study in their normal teaching practice include traditional grammar translation method, communicative method, deductive method and situational language teaching method. These methods will be explained in the following section.

##### *Traditional Grammar Translation Method*

Four teachers Lily, Pine, Carnation and Primrose stated that they have used the traditional grammar translation teaching method most often in their educational practice. They described the characteristics of this method as: it focuses on language system learning;

grammar mastery and vocabulary building are emphasized; understanding of the target language is achieved by way of translation (the teacher does translations word by word and/or sentence by sentence between the target language and the native language); linguistic knowledge and information passing is stressed; teacher's lecturing is predominant in class; it is teacher-centered.

The teachers' choice of the traditional grammar translation method is based on their consideration of one of or a combination of the following reasons.

- 1) The overall English language teaching and learning background and tradition. Most teachers and students welcome this method because both feel familiar with and used to it. Lily explained,

“Because of the traditional language teaching style and traditional students' learning habits in China. Most English teachers at varied levels, ranging from secondary schools to colleges and universities, adopt the grammar translation method. They are used to and experienced in this teaching method. Likewise, most students are accustomed to this method as well” (13 March 2003, No. 3 in Question 7).

- 2) Exam requirements. Nearly all English exams of different levels in China, including the national university entrance examination, College English Band 4 and Band 6, are focused on assessing students' grammatical skills and reading and writing abilities. The grammar translation method helps students take such kinds of exams with more confidence. Primrose stated,

“In my department, public English course for non-English major students is developed with an aim to improve students' reading and writing skills.

Developing students' grammatical skills and enlarging their vocabulary is part of curriculum design. Students' learning achievements are evaluated through term final examinations which are usually made up of five sections - pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing. The traditional grammar translation is the right teaching method to meet our teaching goals" (18 March 2003, No. 3 in Question 7).

- 3) Course type constraints. Pine explained that the courses he teaches decide his selection of the traditional lecturing-focused teaching approach. He mainly teaches theoretical courses, such as general linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, lexicology, English writing and translation, to which it is hard to apply the CLT approach. By way of lecturing combined with translation, he intends to provide his students with as much theoretical knowledge required by the curriculum as possible.

The four teachers revealed that most students find the traditional teaching method acceptable, or "at least, they are used to it" (Pine, No. 4 in Question 7).

Regarding the most commonly used teaching method, Tulip talked about lecturing combined with language activities, which seems to focus on language patterns and grammar. She explained that by this method, she does lecturing first, which refers to the teacher's activities of explaining to students the language system knowledge, like grammatical elements. Then she organizes language activities that involve students in putting the linguistic patterns into practice. The language activities may take the form of story telling or role-play. Tulip stated that her language activities "aim to develop students' communicative skills" (No. 2 in Question 7). In spite of Tulip's statement that she organizes language activities to develop her students' communicative skills, her teaching focus still seems to be on language patterns and grammar rather than meaningful

communication. Hence, I regard Tulip's method as the traditional grammar focused and language pattern focused method and as a result I put her under the subheading of *Traditional Grammar Translation Method*.

### *Communicative Method*

Only one teacher, Rose, directly stated that she has used the communicative approach as the main teaching methodology in her teaching practice. In Question 2, she defined CLT as "an approach that is focused on the development of communicative proficiency rather than on the mastery of discrete language skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation". She said that with this approach, "Students have more opportunity and are encouraged to speak in the target language without being so concerned about grammatical mistakes". This teacher also stated in Question 5 that she prefers to use this approach for the intermediate and advanced learners because "at this stage of learning, students have some basic knowledge of the target language and they have some vocabulary in order to communicate to enlarge their vocabulary". For the beginners, she said that she likes to combine this approach with other types of pedagogy – such as translation method, because she believes that she needs to use much of her native language to communicate with her English novice students. This teacher organizes dialogues, conversations and story-telling as communicative-oriented language activities. She indicated that her role is a facilitator and sometimes a participant in these activities.

This teacher's understandings of the communicative language approach are very comprehensive and accurate in many aspects compared to a few other teachers. But one thing which is not quite satisfactory in her interpretations of CLT is her lack of stress on learners' cultural awareness development. She seems to emphasize listening and speaking abilities over cultural knowledge.

### *Deductive Method*

Daffodil who is from Hong Kong talked about the deductive method. In her opinion, this method is similar to the grammar-translation method. The difference is that grammar rules are concluded from examples with the deductive method, but given directly right from the start with the grammar translation method. The teacher usually sets a few phrases or sentences as examples and then asks students to work out linguistic rules. Daffodil said that this method is "... teacher-oriented and focused on teacher's speaking and explaining linguistic rules." Students from Hong Kong are used to it and she was taught the same way when she was a student.

### *Situational Language Teaching Method*

One teacher, Lavender, said that she uses the situational language teaching method most often. By this approach, "the teacher's role is a context setter and error corrector. The learner's role is an imitator to memorize linguistic patterns" (20 March 2003, No. 2 in Question 7). The student is the center of class. They are supposed to talk actively and

make conversations around the assigned topics and to use the assigned drill patterns. She said that her choice of teaching method was determined by the designated textbook “New Compiled College English” which mainly consists of situational dialogues. She indicated that some students find this teaching approach acceptable, but some feel it boring.

When being asked what her most commonly used teaching method is, Snowdrop answered, “... [selection of teaching methods] depends on what I am teaching, you see. If I teach listening and speaking, I often use the communicative-based approach. If I teach Extensive Reading or Intensive Reading, I also take the traditional method – I do lecturing, ask students to practice pattern drills and/or do some translation” (19 March 2003, Question 7). In China, the course of “Intensive Reading” offered at the university level means more than “reading”. It is “actually not a reading course, but the core course in EFL in which everything the teacher wants to teach (grammar, vocabulary, reading aloud, etc.)” (Li, 1994, p. 13). So Snowdrop uses the traditional grammar translation method in her “Intensive Reading” or “Extensive Reading” course to develop students’ linguistic analytical skills.

#### **4.10.2 Discussion of Findings**

To summarize the interview data in relation to the teaching methods that are most often used by the teachers in this study, I draw the following conclusions.

- Over half of the teachers in this study have employed the traditional grammar translation teaching method most often in their everyday teaching work. As explained earlier, “lecturing combining language activities” proposed by Tulip virtually still focuses on reinforcing students’ linguistic knowledge, such as grammar and pattern drills, but it reaches its goals through the use of language activities, such as game and role-play. Similarly, “the deductive method” proposed by Daffodil is in nature also grammar-centered. Grammar rules are deducted from examples. Therefore, both the lecturing combining language activities method and the deductive method can be seen as a sort of variation of the grammar translation method.
- Most learners in China are accustomed to the traditional grammar translation teaching method which particularly helps them do well in examinations. Examinations play a vital role in China’s education. They, on many occasions, determine a student’s fate and future. The national university entrance examination is a typical one which is directly related to whether a high school student can go on receiving further education (Anderson, 1993). Likewise, examinations scores in university studies may link to whether a student is able to enter a good career upon graduation as employers often take into account students’ academic records. In light of the importance of exams, nearly all teachers and students take exams very seriously. Since most English related exams are grammar-centered and reading and writing skills focused, it is not hard to understand why teachers adopt the traditional grammar translation method and students welcome it as well.

- The nature of courses can determine a teacher's choice of instructional methodology. The CLT approach may be more suitable and relatively much easier to apply in "Listening" and "Conversation" courses whereas the traditional grammar translation method is more applicable to other courses like "Extensive Reading" and "Intensive Reading". Courses of "Listening" and "Conversation" aim to develop students' listening and speaking abilities respectively. The objectives of courses of "Extensive Reading" and "Intensive Reading" are to develop students' reading ability and to emphasize English linguistic forms. "Extensive Reading" focuses on vocabulary building and fast reading techniques whereas "Intensive Reading" involves reading essays very carefully and repeatedly, analyzing grammatical elements, explaining phonetic pronunciation of individual words and discussing reading strategies and writing styles.

#### **4.11 The Teachers' Understandings of the Best Teaching Approach Conducive to Development of Chinese EFL Students' Communicative Competence**

##### **4.11.1 Presentation of the Interview Data**

The teachers' views on what may be the most effective and feasible teaching approach to developing Chinese students' English communicative competence in the specific context of China's EFL education can be put into three categories.



Firstly, four teachers Lily, Tulip, Rose and Lavender argued for a communicative-oriented approach. In Question 10, they stressed that students should be exposed to various media platforms, such as authentic interactive language learning videos and software programs and “VOA and BBC radio programs” (Tulip). These programs provide students with opportunities to access authentic learning material and to practice the target language in virtual situations. Lily described,

“The best teaching approach will still be communicative oriented. Use authentic interactive language learning videos and software programs to stimulate students to use the target language in authentic situations. Organize students to watch videos and use software programs first and ask them to develop similar scenarios or to have discussions. For example, students watch a video program in which new students meet the first day in class at an American university and then they are organized to do similar role-plays” (13 March 2003, Question 10).

Tulip commented that it is equally helpful to encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities to get chances of speaking the target language. An English Corner is a good instance of after-class activities. She defines an English Corner as “an activity in which people interested in English gather together at a venue, say at a square, to chat freely in the English language” (14 March 2003, Question 10).

Secondly, four teachers Pine, Carnation, Primrose and Snowdrop argued for a combination of the communicative approach with a traditional teaching method. In their views in Question 10, the pure communicative approach is not feasible to apply in China’s EFL contexts in its real sense as a result of a number of constraints, such as difficulties in organizing genuine communicative activities in Chinese educational and cultural settings, a shortage of qualified CLT-oriented EFL teachers, difficulties in the

change of traditional English language teaching and learning concepts, styles and materials, lack of availability of authentic teaching and learning resources, large class size of English classes (Section 4.9.1). The teachers argued that a combination of a communicative-based approach with a linguistic-oriented approach would be applicable and beneficial to Chinese students. The linguistic-oriented approach develops students' solid foundation of linguistic knowledge and the communicative-based approach promotes students' communicative skills in real life situations.

“Combination of a CLT approach with some traditional approaches. English is taught in China as a foreign language. CLT is not as easy to apply in EFL settings as in ESL contexts. Many constraints apparently exist. Because of years of tradition in rote memory in Chinese education, it is definitely not easy for both teachers and students to transfer to a communicative approach which emphasizes active interaction and genuine communication. However, if we combine a communicative approach with a traditional approach, students may feel acceptable” (Pine, 16 March 2003, Question 10).

“Combine the traditional method with a communicative-based approach. You have to combine them, providing students with chances to get solid foundation of linguistic skills and to develop advanced speaking and listening capabilities” (Snowdrop, 19 March 2003, Question 10).

Thirdly, Daffodil proposed an adapted CLT approach which she viewed would be the most suitable approach in China's EFL context. Teachers can adopt the essential theories of the CLT approach but adapt them to China's specific situations. She gave an example.

“For example, China is going to organise the Olympic Games. I may motivate students to learn how to show tourists road directions or how to introduce themselves and their hometowns. Given topics which are related to the development of China or themselves, students will be more motivated” (21 March 2003, Question 10).

In her opinion, teachers can adapt CLT to develop teaching materials and to organize communicative language activities which students feel familiar with, so that students will be motivated.

#### **4.11.2 Discussion of Findings**

Both literature and the findings in this study agree that a pure communicative approach is not feasible to apply in Chinese EFL settings, as a conflict apparently exists between what CLT demands and what the EFL situation allows (Li, 1998). However, an adapted CLT approach or a combined approach of CLT with a traditional method may be the best way out. After doing a formal questionnaire survey with 18 South Korean secondary school English teachers and interviewing 10 participants, Li concludes that "... South Korea and other EFL countries with similar situations should adapt rather than adopt CLT into their English teaching." (1998, p. 696). Similar to Li, Rao (2002) after examining the views of 30 Chinese university students on the appropriateness and effectiveness of communicative and non-communicative activities in their EFL courses, suggests that in updating English teaching methods, EFL countries like China need to modernize, not westernize English teaching. That is to say, the best solution would be to combine the "new" communicative approach with the "old" traditional teaching structures. Only by reconciling communicative activities with non-communicative activities in English classrooms can students in non-English speaking countries benefit from CLT. Likewise, Burnaby & Sun (1989) also suggest adapting Western language-teaching methods to the situation in China after they do a study on 24 Chinese teachers of

English on the appropriateness and effectiveness of “Western” language-teaching methods for use in Chinese situations.

#### **4.12 Overall Conclusions of the Research Findings**

In light of the full complete body of the interview data on the understandings and perceptions of the communicative language teaching approach by nine Chinese EFL teachers along with relevant literature, I draw three conclusions: the teachers interviewed have incomplete and inaccurate interpretations of communicative competence and CLT; an adapted CLT approach may be beneficial to Chinese English learners; teacher training courses, particularly relating to CLT, are greatly needed in China.

*The teachers interviewed have incomplete and inaccurate interpretations of communicative competence and CLT*

All the nine EFL teachers have some knowledge and information about communicative language teaching pedagogy. Their knowledge and information were mainly acquired from undergraduate/graduate courses and/or through independent reading of related literature. They were able to define CLT’s characteristics, to list its advantages and disadvantages and to give examples of communicative-oriented activities. Many of their understandings correlate with the current literature. Pine showed a very comprehensive understanding of the definition, characteristics and advantages of the CLT approach. His interpretations are very much in line with those defined in the literature. His relatively

complete and accurate interpretations are a result of his knowledge received years ago in his research studies as a visiting scholar in Canada.

In spite of those understandings which comply with the present CLT theories in the literature, the majority of the teachers in this study seem to have less completely and less accurately interpreted the term “communicative competence”. In comparison to the literature, they have narrowed down the meaning of “communicative competence” by overlooking its social and cultural aspects. As discussed in Section 4.1, many of the teachers defined CLT to be a teaching methodology with a focus on developing learners’ communicative skills. However, in their elaboration, only three teachers mentioned the importance of language use in real life situations, that is, social and cultural aspects of language. Others seem to perceive an equivalence of “communicative skills” with “listening and speaking abilities” or “getting ideas across”. Two typical quotations of such understandings are,

“In my understanding, the CLT approach emphasizes the communication in class between students and the teacher or students and students. It aims to develop students’ listening and speaking abilities” (Snowdrop, 19 March 2003, No. 1 in Question 2).

“The CLT approach emphasizes the ability of students to get their ideas across rather than on grammatical accuracy” (Tulip, 14 March 2003, No. 1 in Question 2).

When the teachers in this study regard “communicative skills” as only “listening and speaking abilities” or “getting ideas across”, they in fact, understand “communicative competence” in a narrow sense, because communicative competence not only means fluent listening and speaking skills, but primarily focuses on “appropriateness of

language use” (Hymes, 1972a), i.e., the ability to use the target language appropriately in socially and culturally determined situations. A learner’s acquisition of social and cultural aspects of the target language should form the main component of communicative competence.

The teachers’ ignorance of the significance of social and cultural aspects of CLT is confirmed by their discussions on communicative-oriented language activities in Interview Question 5. They listed role-play, discussions, music, drama, story-telling and use of computer and Internet as communicative language activities. They explained that the main purposes for using these activities were to motivate students, to stimulate students to speak and to help students build vocabulary (see Section 4.5.2). While communicative activities do help students acquire knowledge in a highly motivated way, encourage students to orally interact with each other and enlarge students’ vocabulary by students’ mutually bridging an information gap (Maley, 1984; Ramirez, 1995), their primary purpose is to develop students’ abilities to use appropriately the target language in varied authentic social and cultural settings. Appropriate usage of the target language is the pivotal theme of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972a) and therefore the underlying aim of CLT. Unfortunately the teachers in this study did not put much stress on students’ social and cultural awareness development of the target language, which reflects their incomplete and inaccurate knowledge about CLT.

In addition, as discussed in Section 4.5.2, the versatile language activities that the teachers in this study organized as communication-based activities are, in a restricted

sense, linguistic-oriented. Most teachers emphasized that they usually required students to use certain pattern drills in discussions, role-plays or story-telling. The language activities they organized were both to reinforce linguistic items required by curriculum and to encourage students to speak. By using language activities, the teachers actually guided their students to exercise on linguistic knowledge through role-plays, discussions, story-telling or other forms of language activities rather than through pure practising void of contexts. There is no doubt that exercises on linguistic forms by means of language activities are much better than pure rote memory, because contexts and scenarios are able to facilitate students' memorizing information, but nevertheless activities with required sentence patterns, strictly speaking, can not be regarded as communicative. In discussing the characteristics of CLT, Anderson (1993) states, "communicative tasks are achieved through the language rather than simply exercises on the language" (p. 471). Being required to use pattern drills, students are virtually doing exercises on the language instead of carrying out genuine communication. Canale and Swain (1980) state that "The second language learner must have the opportunity to take part in meaningful communicative interaction with highly competent speakers of the language, i.e. to respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic second language situations" (p. 27). Genuinely meaningful communication is a central element in communicative activities. When language activities aim to reinforce students' linguistic items, more often than not, no truly genuine communication that involves social and cultural backgrounds of the target language and that involves students' real communicative needs can be conducted.

In sum, the teachers' lack of emphasis on cultural and social aspects of CLT means that they neglect some key characteristics of CLT defined in the literature, like those

summarized by Li (1998) and Ramirez (1995) – the need for meaningful tasks, purposeful interaction, intellectual stimulation, focus on the whole learner and opportunities to share and explore attitudes, feelings, etc.

Because of time limit, this research did not further explore reasons for the teachers' failure to address the social and cultural aspects of CLT. By my personal English learning and teaching experience, I think one reason may be related to Chinese students' extrinsic motivation of English learning. As mentioned in Section 2.5, English education was initially shaped for the purpose of enhancing the Chinese economy by learning advanced technologies of western countries (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). To many Chinese learners, English learning is just a tool which facilitates them to be able to read and understand English documents in their speciality. Most Chinese may never have an opportunity to visit an English speaking country or they may have no desire to go abroad at all. So English to them is just an aid that helps them better understand their work-related English documents. Social and cultural aspects of English do not mean much to this group of people. Regarding students of different levels ranging from middle schools to universities, English, to most of them, is just a compulsory section or course they need to pass in various examinations. Some examinations such as national university entrance exam may be crucial determinants for their future jobs, but once they enter into their employment, English may be never touched at all, if they don't go to visit an English speaking country or if their work does not require English. Therefore, once again, this group of people do not have any communication needs in English. When people have no intrinsic motivation to learn a language or to be eager to know about the people of the



target country and the cultures of the target language, they by nature acquire the language by an extrinsic motivation, such as to pass exams or for the sake of work requirement. When students do not care about cultural awareness of the target language, especially when examinations are grammar-centred and reading-focused, how can we expect EFL teachers to concentrate on developing students' social and cultural knowledge of English?

Extrinsic motivation of English learning by Chinese students may be one explanation of the teachers' lack of emphasis on social and cultural aspects of CLT. There may be some other reasons as well. However, if teachers do intend to organize cultural activities which are more meaningful to their students, they might do better if they organize something more traditional, like have students discuss books they have read in English, films they have seen, radio programmes they have listened to etc. Sending students to talk to people at an English corner may be good practice as well. Another example, as Daffodil suggested, can be asking students to practice for how to speak to people coming for the Olympic Games 2008. This might be a more meaningful kind of role play since students are talking about things they do know something about, unlike Halloween parties or pubs, etc., which are alien. Discussions on topics of interest or on things that students are familiar with would be more genuinely meaningful. The teachers in this study talked more about role plays. Role plays are only one kind of communicative event, and really quite artificial one compared to truly meaningful interaction or discussion. They are more like "pre-communicative". Littlewood (1981) states that pre-communicative activities focus on linguistic forms and on correlation of linguistic forms with their potential

functional meanings. Compared to role plays, meaningful discussions or something like carrying on a project on preparing students for the Beijing Olympics will be likely to involve more aspects of students like purposeful interaction, intellectual stimulation and opportunities to share and explore attitudes and feelings. Many activities of this kind might also address the problems of lack of resources, since reading and discussing or talking at English corner are not costly.

*An adapted CLT approach may be beneficial to Chinese English learners*

Most teachers in this study hold the opinion that a pure communicative approach is not applicable to China's present EFL education background and situations, due to a list of constraints that arise from cultural conflicts and different pedagogical theories and practices when CLT is implemented in China, but a combination of this approach with a traditional teaching method or an adaptation of this approach to China's specific education contexts may be beneficial to Chinese learners' development of communicative competence. Section 4.9.1 discussed the constraints cited by the teachers, which include difficulties in organizing genuine communicative activities in Chinese classrooms, lack of qualified CLT-oriented teachers, obstacles from Chinese traditional language teaching and learning theories and styles, difficulties in access to authentic teaching and learning resources and large class size.

In explaining the difficulties of CLT when being used in Chinese classrooms, the teachers indicated that it is extremely difficult to carry out communicative activities which reflect

real life situations. For instance, Halloween parties are not part of Chinese culture and as a result it is unrealistic to expect Chinese students to be meaningfully involved in Halloween party role-plays. On the other hand, when there is a disjuncture or conflict between western and eastern cultural norms and worldviews in communicative activities, students may resist participating in the activities, because western cultural norms may not be consistent with the values and views formed under their Chinese cultural background. For example, pubs in western countries are nice places for people to socialize, but to many Chinese people, pubs are where people spend time drinking and smoking, wasting time and doing nothing meaningful. When teachers organize pub role-plays, it will be no surprise to meet low interest or resistance from those students with Chinese traditional worldviews and values.

Ellis (1996) states that the communicative approach is a culturally embedded teaching practice. It is a predominantly western language teaching approach which embeds beliefs and values of western people. The communicative approach is difficult to be directly transferred to Asian conditions, because different constructions of meaning that exist across cultures can “inhibit the transferability of particular pedagogical practices between them” (Ellis, 1996, p. 213). Ellis argues, “for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Asian conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted” (1996, p. 213). On the part of Chinese students, they have to reorient or make radical changes to some of their basic beliefs and world values. If Chinese students acquire the English language for real communication purposes, say, they plan to visit or stay in an English speaking country, they have to attune themselves to some of world

values of the target country. An old Chinese saying goes, “When in a village, you have to follow the village’s norms and habits”. On the part of teachers, Ellis (1996) presents a theory of “mediating”, filtering the communicative approach to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms. Similarly, Orton (1990) suggests that teachers can reframe new knowledge to keep with existing Chinese cultural norms and values. Mediating and reframing are good solutions to avoid students’ resistance or non-learning.

Similar to the theory of culturally attuning the communicative approach to Chinese cultural norms, Li (1998) and Rao (2002) both argue for an adapted version of CLT which is appropriate for Chinese education conditions. Li advocates that educators should carefully study their EFL situations and decide their own version of CLT which can best serve their needs and interests. The adapted new language teaching method should take into account the political, economic, social and cultural factors. Li also suggests that grammar can be incorporated into the CLT approach. It would be a misconception about CLT if grammar were totally disregarded. Likewise, Rao (2002) argues that in reconciling the communicative activities with the non-communicative activities, EFL teachers should not be biased towards either of them, but rather towards integrating the two into one. Linguistic competence is the basis of communicative competence. Linguistic competence ensures the correct manipulation of the language system and communicative competence involves using relevant strategies to appropriately use the target language in real life situations. Anyway, a grammarless approach can lead to the development of a broken, ungrammatical, pidgenized form of the target language (Celce-

Murcia, 1991). “It would seem foolish to err on the side of using a communicative approach exclusively and totally disregard grammar teaching” (Anderson, 1993, p. 472).

Literature reveals that in adapting the CLT approach to the specific education situations in China, teachers may receive positive responses if they are able to be sensitive to students’ needs and learning styles. Anderson (1993) indicates that students’ initial reaction towards the communicative approach may be perplexity since it actually goes against the traditional method, but

“... if he were sensitive to the Chinese students’ expectations, they gained respect for him and he was able to integrate the communicative component into the course more easily. This compromise of being willing to be knowledgeable of grammar does not have to take away from a communicative focus” (p. 476).

Both the literature and this study reveal that Chinese English learners pay much attention to grammatical elements, which is largely shaped by traditional teaching style as well as grammar-focused examinations. If EFL teachers are willing to incorporate grammar knowledge into the communicative approach, they may meet less resistance from students and the communicative approach will be gradually accepted, especially after students realize its usefulness and values.

There are quite a few encouraging examples and reports in the literature of how well the communicative approach can be working in China’s EFL contexts if the teacher is sensitive to the needs and learning styles of his or her students, and students in turn are convinced of the rationale and usefulness of communicative activities. In her article “Is a communicative approach practical for teaching English in China? Pros and cons”,

Anderson (1993) quotes a few examples: Harvey's (1985) experiences in teaching English at Tianjin University, Forseth's (1991) experiences in teaching at Jiangxi Normal University and Tool's (1992) teaching experiences in Lanzhou University. Harvey, Forseth and Tool's success in using the communicative approach to teach Chinese students in Chinese classrooms have a common feature: they all first of all successfully convinced students of the rationale for authentic communication and how the communicative approach could help to meet their needs, and then they all designed a structured progressive syllabus to guide students to be active participants in activities. Students seemed to tend to be willing to undertake a variety of communicative activities after they were convinced of the rationale and after they were becoming more confident with the activities under the patient guidance of the teacher.

*Communicatively oriented teacher training courses are greatly needed in China*

A few teachers in this study feel difficult or powerless to change from teacher-centred instructional approach to student-centred instruction, even though they have great desire to make a change. When Daffodil was asked why she did not use CLT often in Interview Question 5, she frankly answered, "I didn't have much knowledge of CLT at all. I found my [teacher centred] class very boring actually when I taught in Hong Kong. I taught my students the way similar to the way of how my teacher taught me when I was in school" (21 March 2003). She also said "I didn't have quite enough time to plan the way of how I teach or to design the [communicative] situations". This finding correlates with the current literature. The literature shows that in the field of ESL/EFL education, some

teachers are not happy with their own teacher-directed instructional practice, but they feel powerless to alter their ways of instruction because they cannot find an alternative effective teaching method or model to follow (Johnson, 1994). Literature also indicates that some ESL/EFL teachers feel the CLT approach demands much time and effort that they cannot afford (Murphy, 2000).

It is obvious that many teachers are indeed willing to make a change in their teaching styles and methods, a shift from traditional teacher-centered approach to communicative student-centered approach. It is reasonable to expect foreign teachers to be organized and skillful in integrating the communicative component into their courses by learning from the successful experiences of other teachers like Harvey (1985), Forseth (1991) and Tool (1992), because foreign teachers are native speakers and they are usually competent in the communicative approach. However, it is a fact that most foreign language teaching in China is done by the Chinese. If they have never talked to an English speaker or have never been outside of China, which is the case for many of Chinese EFL teachers, how can they be expected to follow in the path of foreign teachers when they are not provided with opportunities to be trained in the communicative pedagogy? So apparently, teacher-training courses, particularly courses related to the communicative approach, are greatly needed in China.

Teacher training courses can be focused on two aspects: theory and practice. To be proficient in the communicative approach, teachers first of all need to be exposed to theoretical knowledge about foreign language acquisition, methodology and concepts

about communicative competence and the communicative language teaching approach. It is very important to equip teachers with theoretical knowledge about foreign language teaching and CLT. This study shows that teachers have some incomplete and inaccurate understandings and interpretations of the communicative approach, such as their overlooking cultural awareness development and their misunderstandings about genuinely meaningful language activities. Teacher training courses will be useful to provide opportunities for teachers to revise and refine their educational theories, attitudes and knowledge.

The next step in the teacher training can be centered on demonstrating to teachers the CLT experiences of foreign teachers and successful examples achieved by Chinese teachers so that trainees will have opportunities to get hands-on experiences. Foreign guest speakers can be invited to comment on their own experiences in developing CLT related curriculum and materials either in China or other ESL/EFL countries. Discussion topics and episodes can cover varied aspects, for example, topics on advising teachers to be prepared for students who will oppose CLT because Chinese students may take some of communicative language activities as games rather than serious learning. Students may complain because Chinese students take learning very seriously (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Anderson, 1993). Similarly, Chinese teachers who have experience in using CLT can be invited to give lectures on how CLT can be implemented in Chinese EFL contexts. One good example is Sun Zhi Gang's (1990) article "Using 'case studies' in oral-English classes". Sun explained,



“[teachers can ask students to tell] brief stories about everyday occurrences that contain one or two problems for group to solve. These stories are usually centered around intercultural conflicts between people from different backgrounds. The purpose is to help out students to gain insight into cultural problems and to discover ways of resolving conflicts of values, attitudes, and feelings. This, to an English major, seems very important” (Sun, 1990, p. 27; cited in Anderson, 1993, p. 479).

As previously stated, teachers may be advised to organize students to carry on such language events as reading literature in English, listening to authentic radio programs, viewing popular media, discussion of topics of common interest, etc. These activities are communicative as much as games are, or more so because students are able to involve themselves as a whole when they talk about or do things they do know about.

In the teacher training courses, teachers can also be introduced to the use of technology, like the Internet, videos and educational software in their communicative classes. Technology undoubtedly facilitates teachers doing a better job in the classroom and helping to liven up their class.

Generally speaking, traditional Chinese culture does not encourage risk-taking, but once teachers gain a sense of security they will be confident to accomplish their teaching goals. Teacher training courses by nature equip teachers with a sense of security and confidence.

#### 4.13 Summary

This chapter has presented the interview data which were organized in eleven categories. Typical quotations were inserted in discussions of the eleven themes. Research findings for each theme were discussed in light of the current literature. Overall conclusions were drawn at the end of the chapter. This study reveals that two thirds of the teachers interviewed have not used the CLT approach often. Their EFL instruction is still focused on developing students' grammatical skills and enlarging vocabulary. The traditional grammar translation method or some form of variation is dominant in present English classes at the university level. Three conclusions were drawn: the teachers interviewed have incomplete and inaccurate interpretations of communicative competence and CLT; an adapted CLT approach may be beneficial to Chinese English learners; communicatively oriented teacher training courses are greatly needed in China.

The next chapter will draw a conclusion on the whole research. Recommendations for educational practice and educational research and development will be made. Limitations of this study will be discussed for the benefit of future relevant research.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to explore understandings and perceptions of the communicative language teaching approach by nine Chinese English-as-a-Foreign-Language teachers. The nine teachers are/were from six different universities or institutes scattered throughout China, ranging from northeast to the very south - Hong Kong. An in-depth interviewing technique was adopted to collect research data. The in-depth interviewing was achieved by means of face-to-face, telephone and the Internet. The findings of this study responded to four research questions: how do the teachers define and understand the term CLT? What strategies, activities and material are used in their teaching practice to reflect their understandings of CLT? What are the factors that influence their decision to use CLT for those who have practiced it? And what are the constraints that hinder their employment of CLT for those who have seldom or never used it?

Put into eleven themes defined according to interview questions in the Interview Guide, the interview data collected was analyzed and interpreted in light of the literature. The eleven themes included definitions of CLT by the teachers in this study; the teachers' understandings of typical characteristics of CLT; the teachers' understandings of the advantages of CLT; the teachers' understandings of the limitations of CLT; the teachers' descriptions of how CLT has been reflected in their classes; sources of the teachers' understandings; frequency of and reasons for the teachers' employment of CLT in class; general perceptions of CLT in the institutions of the interviewed teachers; the teachers'

opinions on whether CLT is applicable for China's general EFL education context; teaching approaches used most often by teachers in this study; the teachers' opinions of the best teaching approach(es) conducive to the development of Chinese EFL students' communicative competence.

### **5.1 Recommendations for Educational Practice**

The findings of this study indicated that all the teachers had some knowledge of CLT. They were able to tell the features and purposes of this instructional pedagogy and to describe what they think are communicative activities. They indicated that CLT was characterized by communicative functions, interactive language activities and tasks and high motivation of learners' study interest. They listed role-play, games, discussion around given topics, music, drama, story-telling and use of computer and Internet as communicative activities. Some teachers, especially those who have experiences of living in an English speaking country, have more knowledge about CLT than others. Many of their understandings correlate with theories of CLT discussed in the literature, such as its characteristics, advantages and constraints when implemented in EFL contexts.

In spite of aspects of correct understandings, the research data showed that some interpretations of CLT by the teachers were incomplete or inaccurate. Nor in many cases did the teachers emphasize truly meaningful interaction but rather superficial "cultural activities". As discussed in Chapter 4, when they gave definitions to the term CLT, many of them tended to equate the meaning of "communicative skills" to "listening and

speaking abilities” or “getting ideas across”. Their understandings of “communicative skills” neglected social and cultural aspects of communicative competence, which are pivotal to appropriateness of language use. In discussing typical characteristics of CLT, most teachers did not mention the usage of authentic teaching and learning materials. In addition, the teachers’ descriptions of what they regard as communicative language activities and tasks suggested that their communicative activities that often require incorporation of certain linguistic patterns and drills, by nature were not communicative, because genuine meaningful interaction which reacts to real life communicative needs can hardly be achieved when linguistic items are required. The teachers’ lack of full knowledge of communicative competence and CLT is confirmed by a teacher’s open statement of her inadequate understanding about CLT when she responded in Question 5 to the reasons why she didn’t use CLT often, “I didn’t have much knowledge of CLT at all” (Daffodil, 21 March 2003).

The research finding that the teachers had misperceptions of and inadequate knowledge about CLT implies that in the future educational practice, there is a strong need to provide training courses for both current teachers and new ones, in particular, courses related to the communicative teaching. In Question 3, all teachers revealed that they had never received any CLT-focused training courses. The teacher training courses can be a starting point from which teachers will be assisted to acquire correct theories and practical knowledge of CLT. Despite the fact that some teachers may have been taught some knowledge of CLT during their advanced education at the university level or at their pre-service training, CLT-directed teacher training courses in their professional

development can provide teachers with opportunities to refresh and to further evolve their knowledge and understanding. As suggested in Section 4.12, technical training can be integrated with teacher professional development opportunities to develop teachers' understanding of what are the possible technologies that can assist the employment of CLT.

Another educational practice for Chinese educators could be their attempt to try the communicative approach in English language teaching at the primary school level. Obviously, both this research and the literature reveal that Chinese traditional education approaches and styles are one of major obstacles for the implementation of CLT in China. Chinese pedagogical practices influenced by Confucianism tend to be teacher-centred, textbook-based and rote memory focused. Traditional ways of Chinese education apparently contradict western student-centred educational philosophy. Therefore, as Li (1998) suggests, adopting CLT in an effective way, EFL countries need to change their fundamental approach to education. However, it may not be easy for Chinese educators to make a bottom-up change in one go of the English language teaching approach throughout China and at all levels of education, since China is a big country. But reform on the English teaching approach can start from primary school level. At present, most primary schools, except those in remote rural areas, offer English classes. There will be two advantages in carrying out the English language teaching approach reform from primary schools. On the one hand, if students are taught from the very beginning in a communicative way, they will become used to it and will accept it in their continuing education. Only by changing language teaching methods from the very beginning in schooling can students accustom themselves to CLT (Rao, 2002). On the other hand,

primary school students do not need to take any major examinations, like national university entrance examination, so primary school teachers and students do not have the same pressure of examinations as teachers and students of higher levels. When teachers do not feel the burden of being responsible for students' future by concentrating on helping students do well in important examinations which usually focus on testing linguistic items and reading abilities, they will be likely to try the communicative teaching approach willingly. Likewise, when students are not put under a pressure of getting high marks in examinations, they will most probably like to acquire the English language in a new way which is beneficial to develop their communicative skills. In particular, when students and teachers realize the nature of language for communication, they will definitely welcome the communicative approach.

## **5.2 Recommendations for Educational Research and Development**

As discussed in Section 4.12, the findings of this study indicated that the most effective teaching method that is conducive to the development of Chinese EFL students' communicative competence may be an adapted CLT approach or a combination of CLT with a grammar-focused method. This finding suggests that future research could be conducted on how to adapt CLT to specific education situations in China and, if CLT is to be combined with another method, what methods can be combined with CLT and how they can be effectively combined so that the resulting hybrid is still focused on developing students' communicative competence. To establish a new instructional method, researchers also need to develop theoretical basis for it. Li (1998) suggests, "In the long run, EFL countries should establish their own contingent of language researchers

in order to develop English teaching theories more suitable for their EFL contexts. Change agents must study teachers' perceptions of an innovation to ensure its success." (p. 677). Therefore, setting-up of one or more language research teams is necessary. Research could also be conducted exploring how to develop a model of communication-centered teaching pedagogy that Chinese EFL teachers could follow. Many EFL teachers want to change their present information transmission and teacher-centered teaching, but they feel powerless to make changes because they don't have any alternatives or models to follow. If one or two concrete examples of communicative teaching methods particularly suitable for China's EFL education contexts are available, teachers will definitely benefit from them, because they will be able to try the innovation willingly and with confidence.

In the process of researching and investigating how to establish a communicative teaching approach or model applicable to China's situations, researchers need to draw special attention to developing sets of communicative-oriented teaching contents and textbooks as references and guidance for EFL teachers. By evaluating a Canadian/Chinese cooperative program in English and French language training and cultural orientation and through interviewing ten university teachers of English, Burnaby and Sun (1989) find that the Chinese EFL teachers were struggling with curriculum design if the communicative approach was used. They state,

"As nonnative speakers of English, the Chinese teachers found it difficult to work with a curriculum in which the lesson content and exercises were not provided. They found this kind of work to be time consuming, since they had to develop



content for each lesson on the basis of their students' interests and needs and to develop or find suitable exercises" (p. 228).

English teachers in China are usually not familiar with authentic texts and/or have limited access to such texts. They lack knowledge of appropriate cultural contexts for teaching points and they can not rely on their intuition in the construction of language exercises either. Thus, it is critical to research on communication-focused curriculum design for Chinese EFL teachers so that they will not feel a burden to design their own communicative teaching contents and exercises.

Another area that may need to be investigated in future educational research is how to reform aspects of China's present education system and exam system. The findings of this study suggested that China's traditional behaviorist education styles and state-mandated, grammar-focused exam system are constraints on the implementation of CLT. Research could then be conducted on what changes could be made in the education system to facilitate teachers moving from a behaviorist view to a constructivist view of teaching. At this point, research into the opinions and beliefs of education administrators, educators, parents and students may provide valuable information on what changes and reforms in the education system need to be made. In addition, it is no doubt that grammar-focused testing methods need to be improved if the communicative approach is used. As the saying goes, the examination is the piper that calls the tune. "Perhaps the tide will turn when language testing has changed its focus" (Maley, 1984, p. 13).

### 5.3 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its small number of participants involved. There were nine teachers altogether being interviewed in the data collection process. The nine teachers were from six different universities or institutions. In terms of the big figure of total universities and institutions in China and in terms of the massiveness of China, nine EFL teachers and six universities and institutions are really small numbers. The small number of participants constrains the generalization of the research findings to EFL contexts other than those involved in the study. However, because the teachers were from a number of universities and regions, their common experiences and interpreting seem likely to be shared by many others in various parts of China.

Another limitation of this study is the usage of phones and Internet as media to interview six teachers. Apparently face-to-face in-depth interviewing is able to reach more aspects of interviewees, such as facial expressions and gestures, than the in-depth interviewing via Internet or phone. This limitation is due to the distance between my participants and me. Thus data collected through phone calls and through talks on the Internet may not be as rich as that collected by face-to-face interviews. However, using these media did enable me to interview teachers from a wider variety of regions and universities than I could have otherwise.

As detailed in Section 3.2, the research data in this study was collected through in-depth interviewing. Interviewing is a very useful way to gain rich and diverse data.

Interviewing, however, has limitations and weaknesses as well. On the part of interviewees, they may provide untrue or misleading information either unconsciously or consciously. On the part of the interviewer, he/she may fail to properly and exactly comprehend interviewees' meaning. Dangers of distortion of facts and/or misperceptions and misinterpretations of meanings can be ameliorated through corroborating interviewing data with observation data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). However, due to the constraints of finance and location, the observation technique is not incorporated in the data collection process, which results in another limitation of this study. It would be very useful to conduct future research based on actual classroom observations, possibly classroom ethnographies.

#### **5.4 Concluding Words**

With China's open and reform policy implemented in the 1980s, the Chinese people have been making efforts to catch up with the West economically. They have been concentrating on learning advanced technology of the West ever since. The English language has a definitive connection with Chinese people's Modernization goals, as "Language contains the key to an understanding of the cultural and social context of technology China is importing from Western countries" (Hayhoe, 1989, p. 122). Additionally, with increased direct contacts of Chinese people with English-speakers through foreign trades, government exchange programs, tourism and self-funded overseas studies, especially after Beijing's successful application for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games which certainly will provide more opportunities for Chinese people to have face-to-face contacts with English speakers, more Chinese feel a greater need and enthusiasm

to learn practical and communication-focused English. The communicative language teaching approach, which is basically of constructivist epistemology and philosophy, has the potential to meet Chinese people's needs. Adopting an adapted communicative language teaching approach may benefit Chinese learners to effectively develop their communicative competence. I hope the CLT approach or some form of its adaptation will assist more Chinese people to be able to speak proficient and idiomatic English when they celebrate the Olympic Games in 2008 in the short term and will help China's booming economy dramatically in the long run.

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N. B.: n.d. indicates that the Web page did not have a date on it.

## Appendix A:

### Letter for Participants

Dear participant,

I am a graduate student currently doing M. Ed. in Teaching and Learning at Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Canada. I am writing this letter to ask your help and cooperation for my master's thesis.

Having read lots of research papers on the communicative language teaching approach (the CLT approach) in my academic studies at MUN, I am becoming very interested in this communicative-oriented teaching methodology. Literature shows that it is a very effective teaching approach conducive to the development of communicative competence of ESL/EFL students. Having been informed of this, I plan to do a research on the current practice of this teaching approach in China. I attempt to examine and explore perceptions of implementation and effectiveness of the CLT approach by Chinese teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research objectives are intended to be achieved through interviewing nine EFL teachers teaching at different universities or colleges in China. The study is expected to throw light on current situations of practice of the CLT approach in some of China's universities. The research findings are also expected to provide meaningful implications on how to effectively develop the communicative competence of Chinese EFL students.

This research will be used for completion of the final thesis for my master's. To fulfil my research purposes, I would like to ask your consent to participate in this research. With your permission, I would interview you about your understandings and interpretations of the communicative language teaching methodology. It may take you around one hour for each participation, including the time to read the interview questions before each interview. Attached is the Interview Guide that you may find interesting.

Yours sincerely,

Li YUAN

Appendix B:

Consent Form

Dear participant,

If you don't mind being interviewed for my research, I like to thank you for your willing participation in advance. Though absolute anonymity cannot be assured, I will make efforts to keep you and your students anonymous in my thesis. No participants will be named.

Please be aware that during an interview, you may be making statements about China's education policies. There may be possible negative personal and familial implications if those statements are attributable to individuals. This is a remote risk that I like you to bear in mind before the interview.

For whatever reasons, you are free not to answer any question that you are uncomfortable with. Please be advised that there will be no ramifications should you choose not to participate, or withdraw your participation at any point. If you withdraw from the study, all previous data will be destroyed.

Research findings are open to you. A copy of my thesis will be stored in master's documents at the MUN library.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research. If you have ethical concerns about the research that are not dealt with by me - the researcher, you may contact the Chairperson of ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 01 709 737-8368.

I will be very grateful for your kind consent and cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Li YUAN

.....

I have read and understand the information pertaining to this study as outlined above as well as in "Letter for Participants". I agree to be interviewed for this study.

Signature:

## Appendix C:

### Interview Guide

Name of interviewee: ..... Faculty and University: ..... Interview date: .....

1. Where is your university or college situated in China? What is the size of your university? What programs are offered in your institution or department?
2. In your understanding, what is the communicative language teaching approach (the CLT approach)?
  - 1) What is your definition? (What language skills does the CLT approach emphasize?)
  - 2) What do you think are typical characteristics of this instructional pedagogy?
  - 3) What should a communicative-oriented class be like, in your opinion?
  - 4) What are the advantages of this approach?
  - 5) Are there any limitations of this approach? If yes, what are they?
3. Where did your understandings come from?
  - a. Taught in courses when receiving advanced education
  - b. Taught in teachers' training classes
  - c. Reading from literature by myself
  - d. Academic conferences
4. How often do you use this teaching approach in your teaching practice?
  - a. Never
  - b. Very occasionally
  - c. Once in a while
  - d. Very often
5. If you think you have employed and/or are still employing this approach in your teaching practice, in whatever frequency,
  - 1) Why have you chosen to use it? What factors have influenced your choice?
  - 2) How have you reflected and employed this approach then? What kinds of language activities do you organize in a communicative-based class? E.g. drama, games, music, stories, Internet or other activities.
  - 3) Why do you choose to organize those activities? What are they useful for?
  - 4) Could you please describe me a typical example for what you think is a communicative-based language activity? What specific teaching equipments and tools used? Textbooks? Authentic material used? What about students' participation in class? Actively involved, passively or no involvement? What do you expect students to do in these activities?
  - 5) After you have implemented this instructional approach for some time, what do you think of the effectiveness of this approach in approving students' linguistic/communicative competence?

- 6) What do your students think of the CLT approach?
6. If you have never employed the CLT approach in your teaching practice, why is that?
7. In your teaching,
  - 1) What teaching approach do you utilize most often?
  - 2) What is that approach characterized? What is its emphasis?
  - 3) Why do you choose that approach?
  - 4) Do your students like that approach?
8. Do you think the CLT approach is applicable for China's EFL education contexts? Why or why not?
9. How is communicative teaching perceived in general at your university or institution?
10. What do you think is the best teaching approach conducive for the development and improvement of students' communicative competence in the specific contexts of China's EFL education?









