

The Communicativeness of Activities in a Task-based Innovation in Guangdong, China

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This paper analyses the extent of communicative activities in a Year Four primary school class in Guangdong, where a national task-based innovation has been mandated. The framework guiding the study uses a continuum of communicativeness of activities, developed by Littlewood. The research methods comprised 12 classroom observations and 17 interviews. The findings indicate that most of the activities were on the left hand side of Littlewood's (2004) continuum, in other words, were mainly focus on forms, rather than focus on meaning. There was not much evidence of teaching congruent with principles of task-based teaching due to constraints such as traditional examinations and limited teacher understanding of how to carry out communicative activities. Implications for Littlewood's communicative continuum and contextually appropriate teaching approaches are discussed.

Introduction

In contemporary East Asia, the related concepts of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) form a central pillar of language policies (Nunan, 2003). Despite their popularity at the policy level, recent literature reports on numerous challenges in implementing TBLT in Chinese contexts (Carless, 2004; Hu, 2002, 2005b; Littlewood, 2007). There is clearly a need for more critical scrutiny of the suitability of task-based approaches for schooling, particularly in contexts where TBLT may prove to be in conflict with traditional educational norms (Carless, 2007; Ellis, 2003).

In 2001, the New Round National Curriculum Innovation was launched by the Chinese government, and TBLT was advocated as part of the official syllabus (Hu, 2005a). It is asserted that TBLT in the new curriculum can “develop students’ positive attitude toward learning” and “enhance students’ competence in using the target language” through tasks (PEP, 2001, p. 2). However, the government documents do not define the key concept of *task* clearly. We infer that the Chinese government documents follow the standard understandings of TBLT, such as the definition given by Willis (1996, p. 23), that “tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.” In other words, tasks are focused on communicative outcomes, instead of, or in addition to, the presentation of grammatical information.

In order to gauge how realistic the TBLT innovation is, it is necessary to examine what local teachers are actually doing in their classrooms. One of the core issues is to find out what activities teachers are implementing and how communicative or task-based these activities are. The wider study, from which this paper is drawn, explores how four teachers implement activities in two primary schools in Nanhai district, Guangdong, China. For reasons of space and focus, this paper only analyses the classroom of one of the teachers (pseudonym, Rose). The aim of the paper is to use a well-known framework (Littlewood, 2004) to classify the activities in Rose’s classroom along a communicative continuum. This enables us to shed light on the communicativeness of lessons and the extent to which they are congruent with the principles of TBLT. It is also hoped that an analysis of these experiences can resonate with attempts to introduce TBLT in other EFL settings.

CLT and TBLT in Chinese Contexts

CLT has been a recommended approach in the mainland Chinese syllabus since the 1990s. However, it was not widely implemented due to many contextual factors, for example, teachers’ roles in Confucian classrooms (Hu, 2002), students’ hesitation to participate in communicative activities (Rao, 1996), non-communicative examinations impeding CLT (Qi, 2007), teachers’ limited understanding of CLT and their own sometimes modest English proficiency (Hui, 1997). To facilitate TBLT implementation, a series of new textbooks have been designed and published since 2001. These were written according to communicative

approaches and are claimed to be compatible with the new task-based curriculum innovation. Another measure to support TBLT implementation is a series of intensive training seminars offered since 2003 by local educational authorities in many provinces to provide information about the new TBLT curriculum; demonstration lessons for teachers to observe; and TBLT publications and video materials about new textbook teaching. However, since these are one-off mass-lecture training sessions without follow-up or support, it is likely that this training may be insufficient.

Research in China indicates that TBLT does not seem to be easy to implement, and one of the problems is teachers' lack of familiarity with TBLT. For example, a survey conducted in 2003, which involved 500 secondary English teachers from Sichuan province, shows that 15.2% of the teachers had never heard of TBLT, 50.6% had only heard of the name of the approach but had no ideas about it, 30.8% had read some TBLT information or articles and only 4.4% had actually tried to implement it in their classrooms (Li, 2004). Zhang (2005) conducted a qualitative case study with three primary school teachers in Guangdong and found that although teachers claimed to be carrying out TBLT, few communicative activities were observable in classrooms. One reported challenge was the Chinese term for *task*. One teacher confused tasks with objectives and claimed she implemented tasks in every lesson. One of the problems is that the official documents in China gave neither a clear definition of what a task is nor clear guidance on how TBLT could be adopted in school contexts, so teachers have to adopt it according to their own understanding (Qin & Qi, 2004). Another case study conducted with a secondary teacher in Fujian province showed that teachers reconcile their classroom pedagogy by expanding their repertoire of teaching strategies, neither totally rejecting nor fully implementing TBLT; they integrate into their teaching communicative elements in CLT or TBLT with traditional elements of a *structural* approach rather than making radical changes (Zheng & Adamson, 2003). These studies, however, are only the beginning of empirical research into TBLT in China. More observation of the classroom still needs to be done and this paper seeks to contribute to filling that gap.

In the Chinese context of Hong Kong, TBLT has been implemented since the 1990s (Carless, 2004) and has been more firmly established than in mainland China, whilst still facing some similar challenges relevant to this paper. One strategy to support TBLT implementation in

Hong Kong has been the development of examinations that are more task-based, hence creating more incentive for teachers and students to subscribe to communicative approaches (see Davison, 2007, for a discussion of the tasks involved in a school-based assessment innovation). As the data in Carless (2007) show, however, many teachers still prefer traditional test-preparation techniques as effective ways of working toward task-based examinations. Related to this, Carless (2007) argues that a way forward for TBLT in Chinese settings may be a “situated task-based approach” which acknowledges and seeks to build on contextual realities, such as the belief in direct grammar instruction, the dominance of examinations and associated preferences for reading or writing activities over oral ones.

Framework for the Study: Littlewood’s Communicative Continuum

Littlewood (2004, 2007) suggests that in view of the challenges in understanding and implementing CLT and TBLT, a framework is needed which aims to clarify what CLT and TBLT actually mean and how they relate to what goes on in classrooms. The theoretical framework for this study is derived from a matrix elaborated in Littlewood (2004), which comprises a five-category continuum with varying degrees of focus on forms and/or meaning (see Table 1 below). The left side of the matrix highlights activities that focus more on the teaching of grammatical forms, whilst the right side illustrates more open-ended “authentic” communication focused on meaning, in other words, those which have a higher degree of “taskness.” Those in between have features of both, for example, the communication of new information making Box 3 more communicative than Box 2. This continuum is based on Littlewood’s wide professional experience and is in need of classroom data to gauge more fully its potential. It is a useful tool for this study because it includes on the continuum a range of communicative and non-communicative activities, which facilitates our classification of what was going on in the observed classrooms. This also enables us to analyse the extent to which they resemble standard conceptions of TBLT.

Methodology

This study adopted qualitative case study methodology to explore how teachers implement TBLT in Nanhai, in Guangdong, China. A case

Table 1. Continuum of communicativeness of activities (Littlewood, 2004)

Focus on forms		<----->			Focus on meaning
Box 1	Box 2	Box 3	Box 4	Box 5	
Non-communicative Learning	Pre-communicative Language Practice	Communicative Language Practice	Structured Communication	Authentic Communication	
Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean, e.g., substitution exercises, grammar exercises.	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others, e.g., "question and answer" practice.	Practising pre-taught language in a context where it communicates new information, e.g., information-gap or 'personalized' questions.	Using language to communicate in situations which elicit pre-learnt language, but with some unpredictability, e.g., structured role-play & simple problem-solving.	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable, e.g., creative role-play, more complex problem-solving and discussion.	

study method was chosen because it allowed us to use rich and in-depth data generated from multiple sources so that we could examine the activities in Nanhai classroom contexts from stakeholders' perspectives. Rose was recommended as a suitable informant by the principal of her school because she was regarded as an innovative teacher with potential for carrying out the new TBLT English curriculum. She had also recently won a teaching competition award. The research questions guiding the study are:

- What activities is the teacher implementing in her classroom and how communicative are they?
- What is her rationale for the activities and what factors affect the extent of communicativeness?

The study was conducted over a period of around one academic year, involving 6 weeks in one intensive period of observation and 9 weeks in a second stage. A total of 55 lesson observations and 68 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 4 teachers and their students, of which 12 observations and 17 interviews relate to Rose. One of the main foci of observations was identification of

activities and categorising them on Littlewood's continuum. In the interviews, Rose was invited to explain the rationale for what she was doing in the classroom. Post-lesson follow-up interviews investigated issues arising during lessons. A series of focus-group student interviews were conducted to discuss classroom activities from students' perspectives. Students' viewpoints were important because they were the ones who experienced the classroom activities. All observations were videotaped and interviews were audiotaped. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the language shared between the participants and the first author, and later translated into English.

Rose was chosen as a focus in this article because her case exemplifies issues we wish to raise using data derived from a "research lesson" as well as a regular lesson. A research lesson is a typical means of school-based teacher development in Nanhai and elsewhere in China. This kind of lesson is open to all colleagues to observe and is followed by a discussion meeting. In this 60-minute post-lesson group discussion called "commentary meeting," colleagues sit together and discuss the lesson. It is believed that by doing this, teachers have opportunities to reflect on and potentially improve their teaching. We are aware that the data taken from such an exceptional lesson done in front of colleagues may or may not be representative of the teacher's normal classroom practice, which is a validity issue which needs to be accounted for. However, the prolonged observations over a period of some months enabled us to compare this lesson with the regular lessons where colleagues were not present. Findings showed that the activities from the research lesson were similar to the regular lessons, with the main difference being that the detailed discussion of the lesson enabled us to probe teacher viewpoints in more depth. The research lesson was chosen because it generated data from multiple teacher perspectives so that we could triangulate data from the viewpoint of Rose's colleagues and students. By using data from both research lessons and regular lessons, we were able to provide a detailed analysis of facets of Rose's teaching.

The data analysis for the study was recursive: findings were generated and systematically built as successive piece of data were gathered (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). To enhance the trustworthiness, we triangulated between different data sets and used member checking (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993), whereby Rose responded to emerging propositions which were then revised accordingly.

The Context

Guangdong, where the study took place, is a developed coastal province situated in southeast China. In comparison with some less developed areas in China, it is believed that Guangdong has more potential for implementing the TBLT innovation successfully in view of its comparatively rich resources. The particular district of Nanhai was chosen because the first author was once a primary school teacher there. Her knowledge of the local situation provided her an insider viewpoint and helped her establish rapport with the local teachers.

The participant school where Rose works is a reputed state school with a long history. It is located in an urban area with students above average in terms of ability and generally coming from middle-class backgrounds. The primary schooling in Nanhai is of six years' duration, starting from the age of six. At the time of the study, Rose was teaching a Year 4 class of 56 students. This was the second year of English learning for most students in the class because English starts in Year 3. This class was of the highest abilities among the grade, and there was a relatively small range of ability difference among the students. The class used the new textbook designed for TBLT implementation.

Final examinations in Nanhai, from Year 1–6, are all set by the local Education Office each semester. The English exam in Year 4 has two parts, 50% for listening and 50% for reading and writing. No oral examinations are set. Most items are related to vocabulary or grammar, for example, multiple-choice, cloze, true or false and making sentences with given words. Results of each grade, an important criterion to evaluate the quality of schools and teachers, are sent to the Education Office for statistical analysis after the examination. Our analysis of these examination papers (see also Deng & Carless, forthcoming) indicates the beginnings of trends for some items to be moving in a task-based direction.

Findings

The findings section consists of five sub-sections. The first part uses interview data to sketch Rose's knowledge, beliefs and training. The second part uses observation data to analyse the communicativeness of her classroom activities. The third to fifth parts are three classroom episodes, two taken from Rose's research lesson and one from a regular lesson. These classroom episodes illustrate a variety of activities in

Rose's classroom teaching and factors impacting on their communicativeness.

Rose's Knowledge, Beliefs and Training

At the commencement of the study, Rose had only two years experience as an English teacher. In terms of training, she had not been trained in the theory and practice of communicative and task-based approaches because English was not her major subject in her study at a local Normal University. Non-specialists being required to teach English in this way is a relatively common occurrence in China. In terms of beliefs about teaching, Rose stated that:

I think learning starts with imitation ... I believe mechanical repetition and imitation is a foundation. Without the accumulation, how can students have the proficiency to use the language?

She described a five-step teaching procedure in her teaching:

I use warm-up first, then practice the language items by some mechanical drills. Thirdly, I use some games or activities to consolidate the target vocabulary and structures. Fourthly, I ask students to use the language in written exercises. Finally, I end my lesson with a sum-up.

Rose explained further:

This model provides students the opportunity to learn language gradually, from simple to complex. The mechanical repetition serves as a foundation for the use of language in the written exercises.

It seemed that a major emphasis of Rose's teaching was likely to be on imitation and practice, and she did not mention much of a role for communicative activities. Rose was asked about the concepts of TBLT. She stated:

I think task (in Chinese *renwu*) is learning objective (in Chinese *mubiao*).

In none of the interviews did she relate task with communicative elements. It seemed to us that "task" was a difficult term for Chinese teachers because it was difficult to see the relationship between "task" and "communication" from the term, and the Chinese translation appeared to create confusion with the notion of objectives (a point also made in Zhang, 2005). Rose did mention some elements which relate to aspects of CLT. For example, she stated appreciation of the idea of "group

cooperative learning” because group-work gave students opportunities to communicate. Rose commented on her preparation and training for TBLT.

I don’t know how to implement communicative teaching because I don’t have enough training.

She believed that this applied to her colleagues as well:

I don’t think my colleagues understand TBLT well. We use the same teaching model because they were those people who trained me when I was new. Nobody ever tells us how to implement the communicative approaches.

She said that she mainly learned from demonstration lessons, good lessons shown as examples for teachers from different schools to learn from. Through observations, Rose found that some well-known teachers do not use the same model as that in her school.

They have less mechanical training, for example, they seldom ask students to repeat one by one. Another thing is they do not just focus on the target words, but have a broader language input.

But she added that her students might need more mechanical training so that they could get things right in the examinations. She expressed that she wanted to try out the new strategies learned from demonstration lessons, but she said she needed more concrete support.

Communicativeness of Rose’s Classroom Activities

The learning data reveal that most activities (62.8% Non-communicative learning and 32.1% Pre-communicative Language Practice) in Rose’s lessons were on the “focus on forms” side of the continuum, suggesting a low communicative degree in general (see Table 2). In Box 1, most of the activities (44.9%) are related to grammar explanation or mechanical repetition, such as explaining text grammar/meaning, doing written exercises and checking/explaining answers, pronunciation teaching, spelling, reading the text chorally and repeating teacher’s words/structures one by one. Note that 17.9% of the activities in this category are quite “non-traditional,” normally fun and with some physical involvement, for example, repeating the words with actions and reading words/sentences in a soft/loud voice. Pre-communicative Language Practice activities include ask-and-answer practice (12.9% out of 32.1%); and 19.2% are

Table 2. Rose's classroom activities

Box 1	Box 2	Box 3
Non-communicative Learning	Pre-communicative Language Practice	Communicative Language Practice
Explanation (19 activities, 24.4%) 1. Explain the grammar/ meaning of a text 2. Explaining and checking answers to exercises 3. Others (pronunciation, spelling, translation, etc.)	Ask-and-answer practice (10 activities, 12.9%) 1. Ask-and-answer about a picture/situation, topic	1. Guessing game (1) 2. Personal questions (with information gap) (2 activities) 3. What's Missing Game (1)
Mechanical repetition (9 activities, 11.5%) 4. Repeat teacher's words one by one 5. Read the text together		
Mechanical written exercises (7 activities, 9%)		
Practice games (14 activities, 17.9%) 6. Read with actions, bomb game, read loudly or softly game.	Activities with actions (15 activities, 19.2%) 2. Chant with actions 3. Respond to teacher's instructions by actions 4. Use the given language to do contextualized practice.	
49 activities (62.8%)	25 activities (32.1%)	4 activities (5.1%)

non-traditional activities, often involving student physical actions, such as action chants and responding to teacher's instructions with actions. Although most activities are low communicative, 5.1% Communicative Language Practice activities (Box 3) are observed, including guessing games and personalized questions.

Concerning the more traditional explanation or activities involving student repetition of structures, the Box 1 activities, Rose said that these were necessary activities that served as the foundation before students could use the language. Another stated reason was that these activities are more effective and helpful in preparing students in examinations:

Communicative activities do not guarantee good marks in examination. Some students who are good in oral English cannot get desirable marks.

Activities with actions, guessing or performance were called games by Rose. Rose said that she valued these games because her students liked them and that resulted in students' high motivation and concentration. Students also expressed their favourable feelings toward such games:

Compared with regular reading, reading with actions is much more interesting. I love guessing games because I want to know if I can make the right guess.

Since Rose did not use any of the activities from the Structured Communication and Authentic Communication categories, we wanted to find out why, so we raised the issue. Rose explained that such activities were too difficult for young beginners in a foreign language context:

English is a foreign language. I don't think my students have the proficiency to conduct very complex and challenging activities. For the low-achievers, they have problems in reading the text mechanically, not to say to use the language in a role-play. It is not realistic to ask them to do such activities.

Episode 1 (Bomb Game)

The language focus of this research lesson was to talk about world weather with new vocabulary and a new sentence structure from the textbook as below:

What is the weather like in London/Moscow ...?
It's sunny, windy, rainy, snowy, cloudy.

Rose started the lesson by presenting and drilling these weather words with the use of pictures. In an activity in the middle of the lesson, Rose aimed to drill these words through a game. The name of this activity was Bomb Game. It is called Bomb Game because there is a picture of a bomb among the word-cards. Students were required to read out chorally the word-cards quickly and correctly. But when they saw the Bomb Card, they were supposed to stop reading and immediately hide under their desks; in other words, it is a competitive game. Students were very concentrated, excited and enthusiastic. When it was time to stop the game, students still wanted to continue. Some shouted and asked Rose to play it again.

In the baseline interview, when asked what kind of activity she liked best, one of the activities Rose mentioned was Bomb Game. It is one of the regular activities Rose uses in her teaching. In the post-lesson interview, Rose expressed her satisfaction with this activity and explained her reasons for using it:

I liked this game because it was fun and my students liked it. The purpose of the game was to consolidate the weather words. The activity was conducted because I wanted to motivate them and helped them to relax a bit. This kind of fun game is always conducted in such a situation when the students are tired or when their interest drops. From students' response, I can tell that they liked it and learned things from it. Most of them remembered the target words.

Rose expressed that using this kind of enjoyable activity made her teaching different from the traditional English classroom.

I think in the past, teachers did a lot of frontal-teaching. They wanted to transmit knowledge by explaining things. Now, we invite students to participate in interesting activities.

From the feedback in the commentary meeting, most of the colleagues liked this activity, too. Many reasons are related to its enjoyment and practicality:

Students loved this game and they were concentrated.

It was not a difficult game for both students and teacher. It was controllable although students made some noises.

It was obvious that her students had experiences doing this activity and they did not need much explanation of instructions, which saved time and was easy to manage.

In the post-lesson interviews, when students were asked what activities they liked the best, many reported their positive feelings about Bomb Game. They liked it and believed it was helpful for their learning:

Bomb Game is interesting and challenging. If you are absent-minded or careless, you will fail the game easily.

This game helped me to remember the words. These could be words in our examinations.

It was much better than just reading the words mechanically.

Commentary on Episode 1. From the communicativeness perspective, this game was quite mechanical, classified as Non-communication in Littlewood's matrix, because the focus was on the structure of language and there was little attention to meaning. Our interpretation of the interview data was that communicativeness is not a major priority when teachers choose or design an activity. They interpreted student enjoyment of activities as being particularly important, a natural consideration in a primary school EFL setting. The practicality of an activity was another important thing for them. In interviews, teachers expressed that they did not like activities that needed a lot of pre-lesson preparation. Teachers also stated a preference for activities that were easier to manage in the classroom. From the student viewpoints, they expressed preference for easy and enjoyable activities.

Episode 2 (The Weather Report)

This was an activity near the end of the same lesson. It was a weather report in the textbook with city names and weather given (e.g., London/rainy). Rose expressed that her aim was to get students to use the language in a more complex activity after they had had some mechanical practice. In the first stage of this activity, Rose did some frontal-ask-and-answer-teaching with word-cards. For example, the teacher asked: "*What is the weather like in London?*" The whole class responded: "*It's rainy.*" The information on the cards were the exact content given in the textbook, including Sydney/cloudy, Moscow/snowy, Singapore/sunny and Beijing/windy. While doing this, she put the word-cards on the blackboard. She then demonstrated a weather report: "*Good morning, here is the weather report. It's rainy in London. It's windy in Beijing ...*" After that, students were invited to practice the weather report in pairs with their desk-mates with the word-cards on the blackboard. While doing this, Rose walked around to help students. Finally, three students were nominated to go to the front to present the report. Rose corrected mistakes while the students presented the report (see below).

S: Good morning. This is the weather report. It's sunny in the Singapore.

T: Singapore, OK?

S: It's cloudy in the Sydney.

T: In Sydney.

S: It's rainy in the London. It's a snowy in the Moscow.

T: It's snowy in Moscow. Yes.

S: It's a ... It's windy in the Beijing.

A debate amongst the teacher-observers was heard in the commentary meeting after the lesson. Some teachers believed that teachers should ignore students' mistakes as long as they could get their meaning across. They worried Rose's correction of student mistakes would decrease students' motivation. Other teachers expressed concern that a lack of accuracy in classroom activities would lead to an undesirable examination mark. In terms of language use, some teachers argued that students should have more freedom to use different forms of language in the report. One teacher suggested, for example, that Rose should encourage students to use their previous knowledge in the weather report, such as *"It's rainy in London. You can read books at home."* Other teachers disagreed (including Rose). They argued that it would be too difficult for students because they would get overloaded and confused to deal with different structures simultaneously. Some teachers worried that a lack of formal and explicit explanation in this activity would lead to undesirable use of new language:

You should write the new sentence on the blackboard, explain the meaning and drill them by repetition.

Rose and some colleagues responded that they preferred to drill the language more implicitly, by involving them in activities rather than mechanical repetition or explanation:

I think students would not develop deep understanding just by teacher's explanation. They need to do some activities.

Lastly, some teachers expressed concerns about student preparation for the examinations and argued that language that was not key points in the examination, such as the city names, should not be allocated much classroom time.

In the post-lesson interview, most students expressed their negative feelings about this activity:

I don't like this activity because I don't want to present things in front of the class and I worry my classmates will laugh at me.

It was difficult. I couldn't remember the city names.

The pair work did not help us much. My desk-mate and I both had problems. But we could not get help from the teacher.

My desk-mate does not like to do things cooperatively. I can't work with him.

The above quotations suggest that difficult activities with some communicative features are less welcome among learners because such activities are more likely to cause mistakes which may lead to loss of face.

In a post-lesson interview with Rose, she reported that she believed this activity was a task because acting as a weatherman was stated as a lesson objective. She also believed this was a communicative activity because ask-and-answer was involved among teacher and students. She said students had opportunities to use the language in this activity because they used the sentence structure to report the weather. When asked whether a survey followed by a report or an information gap activity could be carried out, Rose responded that she did not have knowledge about how to design information-gap activities and she worried that open-ended answers in a communicative activity would lead to confusion. She also thought it would not be realistic because if students moved around to do a survey a lot of noise would be made. She said that such activities sounded very complex and difficult to manage in the class.

After the discussion with the other teachers, Rose reflected on the lesson and expressed concern about its effectiveness:

From the feedback, I think my colleagues don't like this lesson in general. I felt frustrated when I heard my colleagues' negative comments. I don't really understand how to implement TBLT. They just told us that this was something we should try, but did not tell us how to implement it in reality. I guess the traditional teaching is less risky.

Commentary on Episode 2. We classified this episode as a Pre-communicative Language Practice activity because it involves practising language through question and answer with some attention to meaning. The students used the given structures without communicating new information, so it would not meet the criteria for Communicative Language Practice. We noted a tension between a desire for accuracy as expressed by some of the teacher observers and a wish for the students to re-activate some relevant previous knowledge as mentioned by others.

A focus on accuracy and repetition of taught forms is likely to reduce the communicativeness of the activity, and hence act as a barrier to TBLT implementation. Related to this point is that the way an activity is implemented impacts on its communicativeness. This activity could be redesigned to make it more communicative or more task-like. For example, students could be provided authentic data on weather in different Chinese cities, and then they could prepare simple reports on the cities that they have been allocated. In this way, some information gap could be created and new information could be communicated.

To sum up, the procedures of the activity carried out in class superficially shared some similarities with TBLT: students' pair work followed by a report; and a relationship with a real-life topic of weather. There was, however, little communication of meaning, and it would be hard to reconcile what went on with standard understandings of TBLT in texts, such as Willis (1996).

Episode 3 (Guessing Game)

This was another lesson from the same unit of teaching, a regular lesson rather than a research lesson. The language focus of this lesson was weather in selected Chinese cities with sentence structures from the text-book as below:

What is the weather like in Beijing?
It's warm, cold, hot, cool.

Rose started the lesson by presenting and drilling these weather words with the use of pictures. In an activity in the middle of the lesson, Rose got students to use the target language through a guessing game. She showed students a card with a city name and nominated some individual students to guess its weather. After some guesses, the teacher then turned the card to the other side and showed students the weather-word and then checked who had the correct guess. This activity lasted for about 7 minutes, and the weather of five cities were used in total, including Kunming/warm, Changchun/cold, Guilin/cool, Nanjing/hot and Dalian/cold as exemplified below:

(The teacher showed a city name "Kunming" to the students.)
T: Please guess. What's the weather like in Kunming?
S1: It's hot.
T: Any more guesses?

S2: It's cold.

T: Maybe. Who wants to guess, again?

S3: It's warm.

T: Let's see. What's the weather like in Kunming?

(The teacher turned the card to the other side. Students then saw a word "warm" on it.)

Ss: It's warm.

T: Who was right?

Ss: Wang was right.

(Wang looked very happy to win the guess.)

Students expressed positive opinions toward the guessing game:

I liked that activity, in which we could guess the weather in different cities. The guessing game was my favourite activity in this lesson.

Reasons are related mostly to affective factors:

Guessing games are very interesting and attractive.

If I make a right guess, I will win the game.

One student talked about the unpredictable result gave him a need to make a guess:

I liked it because I can make a guess according to my own wish.

Another student noted that she could learn knowledge about weather in different places by participating in this activity. Our field notes indicated this activity as successfully involving students in language use:

Students looked excited and enthusiastic. Many students wanted the teacher to pick them to make a guess. They put up their hands high and shouted: "Let me try. Let me try." Most of them could use the target language to express their ideas quite well. Each time when the teacher turned the card to the other side, the students who made the right guess looked very proud to be the winners.

Rose expressed her satisfaction with this activity and explained her reasons for using it in the post-lesson interview:

I am satisfied with today's Guessing Game because it satisfied my intended aim, which was to get my students to practise the new words. I use guessing games in my lessons because it is easy to do in the classroom. Another reason is that I want my students to learn happily by involving in such fun games. Other games I used a lot include Bomb Game, Read Loudly or Softly.

Commentary on Episode 3. We classified this guessing game as a Communicative Language Practice activity in Littlewood's matrix because learners conveyed new messages to meet the communicative need. There was some information gap because students were not certain of the weather in different cities and were obliged to activate their vocabulary by guessing. The interview data showed that Rose was not fully aware of the information gap potential in a guessing game. Rather, Rose seems to regard the Guessing Game as an enjoyable practice game, which required learners to repeat the information mechanically, such as Bomb Game. We inferred from this episode that when Rose used a Box 3 communicative activity, she might be using it less because of its communicative potential for students to use language meaningfully and more as an opportunity to practise language, also obviously a viable goal.

Discussion

This paper has explored how a primary school teacher implements activities in the context of a national TBLT innovation in China. The wider study, from which this paper is drawn, involved an extensive database of lesson observations and interviews, a particular strength of this research. Our use here of data from a research lesson enables us to report multiple teacher perspectives on a single lesson, an interesting aspect of the methodology and an element not frequently found in classroom-based research literature. Whilst we obviously do not seek to generalise from a case study of one teacher, the data do allow us to make some tentative conclusions and raise some additional issues.

The study used as a framework an influential communicative continuum proposed in Littlewood (2004). Whilst Littlewood's categories were based on his own extensive experience of communicative language teaching, the current study has provided data from classrooms to illustrate activities in different sections of the matrix. Using classroom data to exemplify the communicative continuum is one of the contributions of the study. The activities in Rose's classroom are in the first three boxes of Littlewood's continuum, suggesting a low degree of communicativeness. Activities in the first two boxes include traditional grammar-focused activities and some mechanical games. These games, Bomb Game for example, are particularly welcomed by teachers and students. The main factors affecting the communicativeness of activities

are that low-degree communicative activities are perceived as more effective in preparing students for examinations, less difficult for students, easier for teachers to control the learning process, easier for discipline management and more enjoyable. The activities in the Communicative Practice category are used much less frequently. Sometimes when Rose adopted an activity, Guessing Game for example, she did not emphasise its communicative nature and used it for the purposes of language practice and repetition instead. Of course, this is not to say that repetitive practice is not a valuable strategy, particularly in the early stages of language learning.

We believe we have illustrated that Littlewood's matrix is a useful heuristic to document classroom activities along a continuum of communicativeness. To reinforce a point implied by Littlewood, it is important to note that the matrix represents a range of pedagogical options and that no value judgement is being made. In other words, we are not saying that activities on the right are more desirable than those on the left. An appropriate balance of activities would depend on various contextual factors, for example the age and ability of the learners; whether they are studying in an ESL or EFL context; and the kind of course that is being studied. It is likely that young learners and those at relatively elementary levels of achievement would need to carry out a number of activities on the left side of the table, and this is borne out by our findings. Worth exploring in future analyses are possible extensions or refinements of Littlewood's continuum. For example, classifying activities into the categories or boxes in Littlewood's framework is sometimes difficult, and further evidence from classrooms may be useful in refining these categories. Another issue is that there may also be some variation in teacher or textbook intention of the communicativeness of an activity and how it is mediated by teachers and students in the classroom; in other words, the intended communicativeness of an activity may sometimes differ from its communicativeness in classroom reality.

The findings from this paper and the further extensive database of observations for the study (not reported here) suggest that TBLT is not being implemented. It is mandated as an aspect of the official syllabus but what is going on in classrooms may not bear much resemblance to standard conceptions of TBLT—hardly a surprising finding, but worth documenting nonetheless. There is some evidence, for example, from Bomb Game, that providing enjoyable activities was seen as part of the innovation, and whether these games related to TBLT was perceived as

less important. The paper reinforces the existing literature which catalogues the difficulties in implementing CLT and TBLT in East Asia. In this particular study, the two biggest challenges appears to be teacher understanding and the constraining role of examinations. Teacher understanding of TBLT is difficult to develop (see Carless, this issue), particularly in view of the obvious limitations of large scale top-down training events. There are promising possibilities in research lessons as described in this paper, as these are classroom-based and facilitate sharing of views of teachers. If these could be augmented by external support of teacher educators familiar with the theory and practice of TBLT, then they could be a powerful force for teacher development.

Turning to the role of examinations, the introduction of task-based assessment would be an obvious strategy to encourage wider implementation of TBLT. As the Hong Kong experience noted earlier shows, however, the interplay between examination-modes, teacher or student beliefs about assessment and perceived optimum methods of examination-preparation are complex. It is certainly not the case that introducing task-based assessment resolves these complexities (Carless, 2007). This is reinforced in a case study in China where Qi (2007) shows that both teachers and students neglected the communicative intentions of test developers and focused more on the perceived priorities of examiners. As Qi (2007) implies, better communication between test developers and teachers may be an initial step forward in clarifying the nature and purposes of communicative testing. More in-depth analyses of examinations as a constraint to the communicativeness of activities are also reported in a further paper using data from the four teachers in our wider study (see Deng & Carless, forthcoming).

Conclusion

It might be tempting to suggest that CLT and TBLT are not feasible in primary schools in China. This article is not able to provide an answer to that issue. Perhaps communicative activities could be implemented, but they may need a more home-grown emphasis and need to be supported by teacher development activities which facilitate further understanding of theory and practice in TBLT. As Littlewood (2007) reminds us, teachers need to trust their own voice and develop a pedagogy suited to their own specific situations. This point resonates with the call for situated task-based approaches (Carless, 2007) which are adapted to meet

contextual demands for features, such as examination requirements. The version of CLT or TBLT which could facilitate wide-scale implementation in China still requires further research.

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