Chinese EFL Teachers' Cognition of CLT in Elementary Schools

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Abstract—This study investigates Chinese elementary school teachers' cognition of CLT (communicative language teaching). Prepared interviews were conducted with eight Chinese teachers who teach English in different elementary schools in China, with the interviews being translated and transcribed in English. Through repeated reading of the transcripts, the participants' thinking about the main features of CLT was analysed from a linguistic perspective to determine their attitudes towards and knowledge of CLT, their view of language acquisition, and their practice in real life. The results indicate that EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards CLT in elementary school teaching in general; their divergences from the principles of CLT are caused by their previous experience, their knowledge of CLT and considerations that affect teaching practice in classrooms. The study provides a lens for future teachers' training adaption and exposes the limitations of the current teaching curriculum in China.

Index Terms—teachers' cognition, communicative language teaching, teaching curriculum, English language teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has enjoyed recent popularity in China, and the current teaching curriculum encourages teachers to adopt CLT and task-based language teaching (TBLT) to develop students' communicative competence (Zheng & Borg, 2014). In English language classrooms in primary schools, textbooks have adopted CLT principles and contain social activities which allow students to use English in real-life situations. However, in China, language learning is exam-oriented; therefore, the question of how to follow CLT methods in such a context is for teachers a question worth discussing. To investigate teachers' practice, this study aims to explore their belief in CLT from the linguistic perspective, as teachers' thinking is an important component of their practice (Borg, 2003). This exploration in turn allows further investigation of the factors that affect their cognition and teaching practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition, or teacher thinking, has been studied effectively for more than three decades (Burns et al., 2015). This term refers to the mental work of teachers, which is a complex system combining beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, assumptions and so on, all of which influence teaching practice (Borg, 2003). According to Clark and Peterson (1986), teaching is a reflection of teachers' decision making: teachers make judgements and process information based on their cognitive thinking, both in preparation before class and in the classroom. This idea emerged in the 1960s when cognitive psychology was developed and the teachers' role was highlighted (Borg, 2006). The study of teaching was also affected by the model proposed by Dunkin and Biddle (1978), which examines the influence of context, process, product and presage on teaching, using a product-process approach to establish the relationship between teachers and learners, in which teachers are the performers in class while learners receive knowledge. However, this is limited as a way of understanding teachers' cognitive processing, as it interprets teaching to be the behaviour rather than the reflection that takes place within teachers' minds. Later, in the 1990s, the number of studies of teacher education increased rapidly, and these studies could be divided into three broad streams examining teachers' education, the role of the teacher, and actual teaching practice. These studies focused on the role of teachers as thinkers and decision-makers, thus emphasising the mental work and individual value of teachers more than in previous studies, which had considered teachers to be guided by national education policy (Freeman, 2007). Since then, research in this field has steadily gained interest.

The nature of teacher cognition in language teaching is diverse and dynamic, based on a review by Borg (2003) of work published between 1976 and 2002. On the one hand, the concept of cognition is controversial, with 'cognition' also being referred to as 'knowledge', 'beliefs', 'theories' and so on. Some researchers define cognition as thinking and belief, as distinct from knowledge, while others argue that knowledge and belief are basically integrated (Tsui, 2011).

Ellis (2012) distinguishes between three kinds of cognition, suggesting that 'belief' means 'subjective opinions', 'assumption' refers to the acceptance of an unproven fact; and 'knowledge' is the embracing of an accepted fact. However, the boundaries are not clear, as indicated by Woods' (1996) system of BAK, which refers to belief, assumptions and knowledge, three factors that are considered not separate but intertwined.

The areas of study within teacher cognition research are diverse, ranging from teaching language skills (Meijer et al., 2001) and the language-learning process (Peacock, 2001) to pedagogical practices (Breen et al., 2001). This range confirms that teacher cognition is a complex system influenced by several factors and affecting teaching practice in turn. Richards (1996) regards teachers' own experience, personalities, principles and approaches as the factors that could affect teacher cognition. Ellis (2012) argues that belief consists of prior classroom experience as a student, teacher education and language learning. Therefore, to better study teaching practice, it is significant to investigate teacher cognition to understand why and how teachers make decisions in their teaching processes.

B. Language Teaching Methodology and Teacher Cognition

Methodology, in the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, is explained as 'the study of the practices and procedures used in teaching, and the principles and beliefs that underline them' (Richards et al., 1986, p.106). According to Nunan (1991), methodology refers to how to select and arrange learning tasks and activities.

Investigation of teacher cognition in language teaching dates from the 1970s, when the audio-lingual and direct method (ALDM), based on the idea that learning is a way of forming habits, was popular in language classrooms. In this method, the teacher was considered the director of learning behaviour and the source of the target language for students to imitate (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Incorporating the principles of behavioural psychology (Skinner, 1957), learning a language was regarded to be behavioural and structured automatically so that students receive knowledge conveyed by teachers without independent thinking; teachers' thinking was not included either. This behaviourist view of language learning was rejected by Noam Chomsky, who argued that it is impossible that language is learned through habit formation alone, based on the evidence of poverty of the stimulus (PoS) suggesting that people can speak languages which they have not heard before. Chomsky argued that language is learned innately by knowing the rules, that is, through universal grammar (Cook & Newson, 1996). Along with this opinion, in the 1980s, innovative methods were developed (Blair, 1982) with diverse groupings of pedagogical theories and practices, including community language learning (Curran, 1976), Gattegno's Silent Way and the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983); each methodology had its own rationale of language teaching and teacher thinking. This time period, according to Freeman (2016), was the first generation of the thinking movement, which represented a shift toward encouraging teachers to think methodologically in response to classroom practice. It was in the 1980s that teacher thinking became a part of classroom teaching (Freeman, 2007). Following this step, the work of the second generation was to think synthetically, with the emergence of electronic teaching and communicative language teaching, which reflected the idea that teacher thinking should be synthetic, combining the selection of teaching materials with principles. In this way, teacher cognition could be highlighted, as classroom teaching activities were chosen by teachers based on their individual thinking. The growing study of teacher cognition in this time period was caused, to some extent, by research suggesting that it is impossible to learn deeply about teachers and teaching without understanding teacher beliefs and thinking.

In this study, the communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology is discussed in terms of its main features and principles. CLT aims to develop students' communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in language acquisition and applies the theoretical aspects of the communicative approach by emphasising the connection between communication and language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In CLT, function is emphasised over form, and students are encouraged to use the target language to communicate in class (Yuan, 2011). According to Whong (2013), CLT stresses the features of authenticity, fluency, learner autonomy, interaction and task-based activities. Although this method is popular with policymakers for promoting a communicative approach, it has spurred criticism and debate. The first challenge is that teachers who claim to follow the communicative approach are less communicative in class (Nunan, 1987; Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). The second is that CLT is not acceptable or popular in all countries outside the West (Whong, 2013).

Previous studies of teacher cognition, according to Borg (2003), have focused more on grammar and skills instruction. Few studies of teacher cognition and understanding of CLT have been conducted (Tajeddin & Aryaeian, 2017). Mowlaie and Rahimi (2010) conducted a quantitative study of teachers' attitudes toward CLT and their practices in real classrooms in Iran to determine whether teachers supported the principles of CLT and whether there was a gap between cognition and practice. The authors believe that teacher thinking is a determining factor in implementing teaching practice and should be taken into account along with theoretical perspectives.

C. CLT in China

As Wedell (2008) points out, in East Asian countries, the curriculum design differs greatly from the reality of classroom teaching. In China, there is a gap between the expectations set by policy and reality, meaning that some teachers fail to develop students' communicative competence as they rely heavily on textbooks and focus on grammar, writing and reading proficiency (Wu & Fang, 2002). What is more, under the influence of Confucian culture, teaching in China is considered as the accumulation of knowledge rather than short-term usage. Teaching tends to be traditional and teacher-centred, with the role of the teacher being that of a facilitator and guide to fill a student's 'empty vessel' with knowledge (Kraut & Poole, 2017).

According to Rao (2013), English education in China is affected by the curriculum and educational policies, the history of which can be divided into five stages: before and after 1945, the first renaissance (1956–1966), the period of the Cultural Revolution and the second renaissance (1977–). Traditionally, for English language teaching, the mainstream approach was the grammar-translation method, which prioritises reading and writing over speaking, memorising over communicating, and learning language through translating the foreign language into the native language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). For a long time, despite the spread of new approaches like the audio-lingual or direct method from the West, due to lack of training and low confidence in these approaches, English teachers still preferred the grammar-translation method (Rao, 2013). To promote English language teaching in China after the 1970s, great changes were made in language education policy as part of the trend of national development. After 1978, with the end of the Cultural Revolution and modernisation reforms, foreign language learning has gradually come into the spotlight for it role in opening up and internationalising the culture (Hu, 2005). In 1979, in the wave of the second renaissance, communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced by Li Xiaoju and her colleagues, who implemented the project named Communicative English for Chinese Learners (CECL) and developed a series of English language teaching (ELT) textbooks based on the communicative approach (Li, 1984).

This method seeks not only to influence Chinese development policy but also to respond to the disadvantages of the grammar-translation method. In contrast to the grammar-translation method, in which reading and writing are emphasised, Li's method addresses language use in language learning, in terms of using authentic language in real situations in which students have the need to communicate in the foreign language. Under this system, the teaching classroom should provide learners with sufficient authentic input, a real speaking environment and free communication, with learner-centredness featuring more prominently than teacher-centredness (Li, 1984). However, this method does not attract large numbers of Chinese EFL teachers. According to Burnaby and Sun (1989), interviews with 24 Chinese English teachers suggested that many believe that CLT is beneficial to students who are going to go abroad, while for students who stay at home, the traditional language-teaching method is more effective. Furthermore, limited time and large class size constrain the implementation of a communicative approach.

There have been conflicts and doubts about the strength of this method compared to traditional language teaching methods, even though it aims to develop students' communicative competence, which follows the trend of modernisation reform. In a study at Huadong Normal University (a university in China), students who were trained using the CLT method could speak freely and simultaneously but performed worse than those who had received traditional teaching in terms of grammar and vocabulary (Wang, 1999). Therefore, there is no denying that CLT and GTM each have their own strengths and weaknesses and should be treated by considering the real situation. Anderson (1993) also explores the issue of CLT in China in a six-week training programme. The researchers mention that due to the traditional language teaching approach being teacher-centred and book-centred, the textbook, which focuses on grammar, reading and writing, does not promote CLT. Also, in terms of teacher cognition, it has been found that some teachers hesitate to use CLT in class. Kraut and Poole (2017) conducted a survey of 65 Chinese EFL teachers after a month-long training course in CLT to study the teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about CLT. The results indicate that teachers believe that they should give students more time for target-language output and authentic input and create a positive learning environment. In this study, teachers' cognition and understanding of CLT will be further investigated. Specifically, the study investigates whether teachers are capable of teaching using the communicative approach along with the curriculum in elementary school teaching by exploring three research questions:

What is teachers' cognition of CLT?

What factors do they think affect their cognition of CLT?

What do they practice in real-life teaching?

III. METHODS

A. Participants

The participants in this qualitative study were eight Chinese teachers teaching English in elementary schools and in educational institutions. Convenience sampling was adopted in this study: the participants were selected from the author's university based on two factors. The first is that all of them had obtained education qualification certificates, which meant that they had knowledge of teaching. The second is that they all taught elementary school students in the eastern part of China and knew about the current elementary teaching curriculum, which advocates student-centred and communicative language teaching. Thus, they were suited to take part in the investigation discussed above. All eight teachers were around 23 years old, with a mean of 4 years of experience teaching English. In the study, pseudonyms are used to avoid participants being identified (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Participants	Age	Years of teaching	Learner levels
Daisy	26	5	Grade 6
Dorothy	23	4	Grade 4–6
Grey	24	4	Grade 1
Selina	23	2	Grade 1–2
Zoey	24	2	Grade 1–2
Leo	24	3	Grade 4
Cheng	24	2	Grade 3–6
Judya	23	5	Grade 1

B. Data Collection and Analysis

Prepared interviews were given to the participants, lasting 35 minutes on average and focusing on teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about communicative language teaching, in particular how CLT works with Chinese elementary students under the current teaching curriculum. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and were conducted by the author in Chinese and then translated by herself into English. According to Dörnyei (2007), such structured interviews may fail to yield rich data and lead to less flexibility. To solve this problem, some of the questions and the order in which they were asked were adjusted based on the participants (Gass & Mackey, 2013), and sometimes recordings were stopped by the researcher to ask for the participants' interpretation.

The interview data were analysed using emergent thematic analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005); interviews were categorised according to the questions and read to detect patterns and differences. Overall, the data were analysed inductively through repeated reading of the interview transcripts (more than three times each) to identify the characteristics which reflect teachers' cognition and the factors affecting it.

IV. FINDINGS

According to the interviews, all participants had heard about CLT. They described it as a student-centred class, giving students more chance to communicate and interact, which are indeed some of the basic principles of CLT. Five teachers had heard of CLT from their previous teacher trainers, one had learned this method from teacher guidebooks, and two had received training on the subject in their educational institutions. Overall, among these teachers, only two had received training in the institution in which they worked; most of the teachers had learned teaching by themselves to gain a teaching qualification or from prior learning experience without having received systematic training.

Based on the teachers' definition of CLT, the interview presented several questions about the characteristics of CLT discussed in Whong (2013) and Chen and Wright (2017), including authenticity, interaction, error correction, learner autonomy and fluency. In this section of the paper, teachers' cognition of CLT in relation to these aspects is discussed from a linguistic perspective.

A. Interaction and Meaningful Activities

It is not surprising that all participants addressed the role and importance of interaction and meaningful activities in CLT classes. They stated that there should be more interaction in class, whether it be teacher-student or student-student interaction, to encourage students to speak more. Three teachers emphasised S-S interaction over T-S interaction based on their view of the role of teacher, which was that

the teacher should only be the guide, controller and monitor in class. More chances need to be given to the students to talk to enhance their speaking ability, which is also beneficial to their pronunciation.

However, it is worth noticing that those teachers who emphasised S-S interaction ignored other roles of teachers apart from those of controller, guide and monitor. According to Harmer (1991), the teacher can also be the prompter when students work together, serving as a resource when students need help while working in pairs. The teacher's role should be variable depending on the students' age and standard of English; the teacher can not only guide them but also set them on the right track. Those teachers who supported the idea that there should be more T-S interaction in class noted:

These students are at an early stage of learning the language, and they do not have the ability to speak much. If I give them much time to talk, they may speak Chinese later in the discussion (Daisy & Grey).

Based on the teachers' thinking, it is true that interaction plays an important role in L2 classrooms. From the sociolinguistic point of view, when the students are speaking, they are actually creating their own language resources, and in this process, language is learned through dialogue, which means that language acquisition lies in social interaction rather than, as in the formalists' view, being acquired natively (Artigal, 1992). Apart from this view, as mentioned before, the participants believe that language is a tool for communication; thus, the functionalist point of view could also support their emphasis on interaction.

The role of interaction is significantly addressed in Second language acquisition (SLA) studies. The influential interaction hypothesis proposed by Long (1981) argues that interaction provides learners with input, output and negotiation of meaning, from which learners can learn a language.

Input, the formalists argue, plays the role of a trigger for children to activate their 'internal mechanism' for acquiring

language (Cook & Newson, 1996). Similarly, interaction is also addressed in cognitive linguistics, which holds that it provides input for learners to process through the cognitive mechanism, which works through attention, rehearsal and connecting with previously established knowledge (Ellis, 1994). In the classroom, students are rational learners influenced by frequency, recency and salience. From the input they receive, they can extract schemes from examples, especially those with salience (Ellis, 2006). Thus, in discussion, students can process input information, which can be the output of peers or the teacher, to build up knowledge.

Krashen (1985) has advanced the input hypothesis, proposing the idea of comprehensible input, which refers to input containing information from which students can infer, which means input a little above the students' language standard. From this point of view, T-S interaction is important in the SLA classroom, where teachers' output is slightly above the students' level of competence in English. In addition, in this process, the teacher can give students information to help them test their hypothesis: once the students formulate a hypothesis about language use, one way to examine it is to depend on the input provided by the teacher (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). What is more, this hypothesis also indicates that students should be engaged in meaningful activities at a level slightly above their competence. From the cognitive linguistic perspective, beginners will use most of their resources to process the message and thus will not pay attention to the accuracy of the grammar. Gradually, the information will reflect new knowledge through practice, and eventually, learners will be able to process it automatically (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

However, it has been argued that SLA classrooms cannot provide adequate input for students to develop their communicative competence, especially in the teacher-fronted classroom, where students react to the teacher's speech, as, in 40–45 minutes of class time, each student has little chance to produce language if they only respond to the teacher. Besides, it is argued that in the discourse between teachers and students in the English classroom, the teacher and the student do not take turns like native speakers. Here is an example:

(1) T: Stop right there. So she found them in a trunk in the attic. Okay, that's two words that we need to discuss right there. Trunk and attic. Now, trunk. A trunk is part of a car. But is a car in the attic?

(2) T: Now what do you think trunk is? [pause] Now, remember, what did she find? They found—she found bracelets and earrings in the trunk? What could it be?

(3) S1: Uhmm...

(4) S2: Oooh! [waving his right hand]

(5) T: What would you put bracelets and earrings in?

(6) S4: A box.

(7) S2: In a box?

(8) T: In a box! A trunk is like a –

(9) Ss: Box.

(10) T: A BIG box. Sometimes they're like this big [leans over to show width of a big box] and you open 'em up like this [motion the opening of treasure chest lid]. It's like a treasure chest.

(11) T: There's a—oh! How many of your parents have like a big suitcase? That's like a big box? And something you open it up and it looks like a treasure chest or like—a trunk. A trunk is a what? A big box where you put things. Do any of your families have a trunk? Any big trunks?

(12) T: Yeah. And they're pretty heavy to carry.

(13) Ss: Yeah.

(14) S3: Yep.

(Pacheco & Gurierrez, 2009, p.131)

When the teacher is trying to help students comprehend the passage, instead of telling them what it means, the teacher guides and leads them to understand the meaning, which is beneficial for activating students' thinking. However, the way that teacher and students discuss a problem is different from the interactions between native speakers in authentic conversation because the teacher has the power to dominate the conversation. Thus, considering the teaching environment in China, where the teacher leads the learning and teaches following the book, interaction between peers in class is necessary. Although the study participants' views diverged regarding whether there should be more S-S or T-S interaction, they all acknowledged that in S-S interaction in class, group work and pair work are more effective. They all think individual work is limited because of the lack of interaction and thus will not encourage it in a CLT class. Swain (1985) proposes the comprehensible output hypothesis in response to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, arguing that verbal production can facilitate language processing deeply; thus, when students are required to discuss within groups, they are pushed to produce language and can see the limitations of their interlanguage. Study participants also mentioned engaging students in interaction through meaningful activities that require heavy use of target language communication. These teachers encourage students to do role-play and free talk (Judya) in class, an approach which is influenced by their view of language acquisition and specifically by the fact that they believe, for children, the goal of learning English is to develop their communicative competence:

Language is a tool for people to communicate with others (Zoey), and letting students talk more in class is a good way to keep their interest in English. (Daisy, Judya & Dorothy)

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), class activities are designed for students to complete tasks in which they can share information or negotiate meaning. When asked about their preference for pair work or group work, five

teachers argued that

group work is more effective as it promotes students to exchange ideas and improve their communicative ability. (Cheng, Judya, Leo, Selina & Dorothy)

Even though these teachers encourage students to exchange ideas through the assigned tasks, some teachers mentioned that when students did not understand, they would tell them the answers rather than involve them in negotiation for meaning. As they believe students do not have the ability to explore the meaning in English with their group members (which goes against the leading principle in CLT) the class remains teacher-centred. This consideration of students' standard of proficiency was also applied by those teachers who favoured pair work over group work, citing, first, the tendency of young learners to talk about other topics in discussion and the fact that pair work is easier for teachers to monitor. The second factor they cited is the need to consider each student. In pair work, every student has the chance to talk, unlike in group discussion, where the leader may be talking and other students may be unwilling to speak. (Daisy, Zoey & Grey)

B. Active Learners

In accordance with the interaction-based view, each study participant believed that learners are active in learning, as they need to communicate more in class, which can only be achieved by themselves. This is consistent with the active principle of CLT, which is that students learn actively in communication tasks rather than receive knowledge passively. This can be linked to the input processing model proposed by VanPatten (1996), which states that active learners are important in language learning. One principle in this model is that learners tend to process meaning before form, which means that they process content words first to acquire the meaning. This is consistent with the functionalist point of view, which assumes that learners learn language through the need to make sense of conversation (Whong, 2013). However, study participants felt that to enact this principle, teacher control is very important, as the learners are elementary school students who have little self-control and whose attention is easily lost. Those teachers who talk more than their students justified doing so by explaining that children do not have the ability to control themselves and concentrate on communicating; therefore, they make teacher control a feature of their classes.

C. Authenticity

One feature of CLT is a preference for the use of authentic language teaching materials as an important aid to second language acquisition. Such materials provide students with opportunities in the learning environment for language use that is linked to the real world (Nunan, 1998). However, study participants expressed different opinions about whether to present the authentic materials to their students. Those who believed it is useful to do so argued that

being exposed to target language usage in daily life is good for their communication skills because they need to know how native speakers communicate and in this way could broaden their view. (Judya, Selina & Cheng)

Given the participants' shared view that the purpose of language learning is to use the target language to communicate, it is important for them to introduce authentic materials to help learners develop their ability to cope with real-world language. Once they enter the target language environment, they can adapt to it and integrate into society with confidence. Canale and Swain (1980) propose four dimensions of communicative competence, including discourse competence, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. In terms of strategic competence, students are required to learn to cope with authentic conversation and keep it going. When they fail to find English language expressions, they should use strategies to maintain the conversation, such as the strategy of reduction to avoid uncertain language forms (Hedge, 2000).

Five teachers argued that it is unnecessary to give authentic materials to students at their age as they may not understand because of their lack of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. They mention that authentic texts are difficult for learners to understand. These teachers think that adapted books are more suitable for beginners. In this way, selection of the materials is important and teachers should consider the sources of the materials for students' interest.

According to Bax (2003), the learning context plays a vital role in EFL classrooms, and the teacher should design collaborative activities using the coursebook. When asked where they find their teaching materials, all the participants said that they prioritise the coursebook. They think that some activities in the coursebook are suitable for students, and they choose these directly. Apart from this, authentic materials like videos and English songs are also selected from online sources, although these tend to be used as lead-in activities. When teachers use tasks from the textbook, they should connect the activities with daily life to compensate for the lack of authentic materials.

However, there has been debate about whether to use a large number of authentic materials in EFL classes. There is no denying that being exposed to authentic materials is helpful for learning about the target language environment and culture and thus could develop communicative competence. But some researchers argue that this method fails to teach grammatical rules to help learners achieve accuracy and that the lack of systematic grammar teaching may result in inaccurate language usage (Ju, 2013).

D. Fluency and Accuracy

The controversy over authentic materials lacking resources for building knowledge of grammar reflects the fact that, in CLT, the balance between fluency and accuracy is always an issue, as the stress placed on oral production and interaction differs from traditional language-teaching methods in which the written language is taught. CLT focuses on

language comprehension rather than linguistic structure, as learners pay attention to meaning before language structure (Nunan, 1989). However, the emphasis on speaking ability does not mean that accuracy is ignored or is insignificant in language learning. It is true that, especially in speaking, learners' errors can be tolerated only if they do not impede comprehension. This standard may lead to inaccuracy in written language. According to Alamri (2018), in Saudi Arabia, secondary students who are taught using the CLT approach are able to talk fluently in English, but they show worse performance in writing tasks. On this question, whether to focus on fluency or accuracy, the participants had different views. Three teachers believed that fluency is more important for young learners, noting:

Even though students need to learn about linguistic structure, the teacher should not be too strict with them. For young learners, keeping their interest and enabling them to express ideas are the most important things. (Zoey, Selina & Leo)

These teachers think that at the beginning stage, achieving accuracy is difficult. It is important for students to have the confidence to speak English and let their voices be heard. Those teachers who value accuracy mentioned that accuracy is the foundation of learning a language and that students need to learn grammar well to pass their exams in the future.

E. Error Correction

Teachers' views of fluency and accuracy also affected their approach to correcting students' errors. All the teachers understood that in language acquisition, errors are inevitable, especially for beginners. They all regarded errors to be positive, as errors reflect students' knowledge gaps; this perspective differs from the traditional language teaching method, which regards errors as false production. As a result of this perspective, teachers could adjust their teaching plans based on students' learning situations. On the one hand, this is consistent with one feature of CLT, the fact that 'language is created by the individual, often through trial and error' (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). On the other hand, according to the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH), learners' errors are influenced by their first language, a phenomenon called language transfer. However, researchers have found that some errors cannot be explained from this perspective. Later, error analysis was developed to help teachers analyse the types of errors students make and thus to provide teachers insight into the learning process and the problems students face. Teachers remarked:

To be honest, I encourage students to make errors because this is the process for them to test their hypothesis of knowledge and thus to examine themselves. By observing the errors they make, I can know how far have they gone. (Cheng, Selina & Zoey)

Selinker (1972) proposes the concept of interlanguage to describe the language that learners currently know. Through analysing students' interlanguage could reflect the first language transfer, the second language knowledge. Thus, for beginners, it is very important for teachers to view errors from different aspects, not only to consider language transfer, but also to analyse in detail and explore students' way of learning.

There has been debate about whether, when students make errors, the teacher should give instruction. One claim is that instruction has no effect on second language acquisition, based on Krashen's input hypothesis, which, as mentioned already, argues that language is acquired through comprehensible input. However, the study participants thought instruction was necessary for students, as they believed that if they did not correct students, they would continue to make errors:

The role of the teacher as a corrector should be emphasised in class since it is the teacher's responsibility to correct students so that they will not make such errors in the future.

This could be explained in light of cognitive psychology, assuming that to effectively draw the attention of speakers to form–meaning links and help them to attend to training and instruction will be helpful for their study (Skehan, p. 47). This idea is debatable from the generativist point of view, which holds that children do not receive or accept negative feedback and that positive evidence is the main source from which children acquire language using the innate language faculty (Cook & Newson, 1996).

The teachers in this study diverged in the modes of correction they adopt, in terms of both the kind of errors they choose to correct and the type of feedback they give. A focus on form approach corrects errors only if they influence comprehension and impede communication. From the interviews, it is obvious that the teachers who emphasise language accuracy tend to correct students' errors of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, which is more forms-focused and disobeys the selective correction principle espoused within CLT. Dorothy and Daisy comment:

I will not tolerate the grammar and vocabulary errors they make in class. Grammar knowledge is very important in the examination, and I have taught in class already that if they make such errors of grammar, I will correct them once they finish their speech. I will also not tolerate vocabulary errors in terms of spelling or wrong meaning, as this needs to be memorized outside of class.

Some previous studies investigating correction draw no conclusions regarding types of correction because of a lack of experimental evidence (Russell & Spada, 2006). A later study by Lyster and Saito (2010) mentions three types of corrective feedback: recasts, explicit feedback and prompts. According to the interviews, recasts and explicit correction are the modes of correction most widely applied by teachers in class. For those teachers who favour recasts, such as Zoey, Cheng and Leo, students' confidence is emphasised and prioritised; they think explicit correction may hurt students' feelings and their self-esteem. Although these teachers consider students' personality and motivation, it remains uncertain whether this method of correction is effective since there is growing evidence showing that recasts,

especially of grammar, are unacceptable for young learners in particular (Ammar, 2008). Regarding the effectiveness of explicit feedback, there have been conflicting findings (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Loewen & Nabei, 2007). However, broadly, explicit instruction is favoured in focus on form classes, but it is worth noticing that this is not adopted in absolutely all teaching contexts; thus, the teachers should link to their class in reality.

V. DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews, it was concluded that teachers' cognition of CLT was affected by three elements: their previous learning experience, their view of language acquisition, their knowledge of CLT and the factors influencing their teaching practice. Firstly, according to the interviews, the participants who rejected the traditional language teaching method considered it boring based on their own previous learning experience. Secondly, in terms of the view they adopted of language acquisition, the participants asserted that the goal of elementary school English learning is to develop students' communicative competence, which is consistent with CLT's aim of improving students' ability to communicate. Communicative competence, proposed by Hymes (1972) as a broader concept than Chomsky's linguistic competence (1965), adds 'communicative' to competence, arguing that it is important for learners to apply language knowledge in communication. In this study, the participants' view of language also reflected a functionalist point of view, which holds that language is a system for expressing meanings, an idea which was also emphasised by the participants:

I think one of the advantages of CLT is to give students a chance to express their ideas and exchange with one another. After all, the goal of learning a language is to communicate.

Consistent with the functional view of language acquisition, the common features of CLT raised and acknowledged by the participants in the interviews were interaction, meaningful activities, and the activeness of learners.

Thirdly, the participants diverged in their knowledge of the features of CLT. Since CLT addresses real-life communication, authentic materials are used in class. However, some participants regarded this feature as unnecessary. However, even though some teachers argued that, given the low level of English competence of elementary school students, authentic materials would be difficult for them to understand, it is nonetheless possible to choose materials with easily understood content, which can also be adapted by the teachers. What is more, the participants had different opinions regarding error correction. As mentioned, errors that could impede understanding and communication should be corrected; however, two teachers put more emphasis on errors of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, which disobeys the selective error correction principle of CLT.

When discussing attitudes toward CLT and their teaching practice, all participants claimed that for elementary English teaching, they preferred CLT classes for two reasons. Firstly, interest is an important factor in language learning, which can be stimulated through CLT.

For beginners, keeping their interest is the main purpose of language teaching. As this stage lays the foundation for future learning, if they lose interest at the very beginning, it is difficult for them to insist learning later. (Zoey, Judya, Selina, Dorothy & Daisy)

The teachers believed that in CLT, involving students in communicative tasks in which they can speak more of the target language is a good way to keep their interest. According to the interviewees, based on their observations in class, when students are given meaningful tasks which require them to use English to communicate, they seem to be more enthusiastic and active in class, especially in activities like role-play and peer discussion. However, it is worth noticing that for students who are shy or who show worse performance in English, pushing them to use a second language may be a burden for them.

Secondly, apart from interest, developing students' autonomy is another reason for teachers to adopt CLT.

Even though the teachers preferred to adopt CLT when teaching children, they demonstrated that they actually use this method seldom in practice. Here are four reasons cited by all the participants. Firstly, students at a young age are hard to control and are easily distracted.

Students lack self-control, and sometimes they do not even listen to the teacher. Therefore, if they take part in interactive activities, they may get too excited and forget what to focus on in the tasks. They only enjoy playing and having fun. (Grey, Judya & Daisy)

In addition to the characteristics of young learners, the teacher's ability is another challenge to the implementation of CLT named by the teachers interviewed. Grey and Cheng note:

CLT poses a significant challenge for teachers as they need to design the activities and manage time properly. Since there exists much uncertainty in working with children, teachers also need to make sure that the students are on the right track.

Most of the teachers lack confidence in their professional knowledge and capacity to ensure the accuracy of task outcomes while using many communicative activities. Besides, currently in China, according to Dorothy, teachers are not trained or encouraged to use CLT.

The third factor that affects teachers' likelihood of choosing CLT is the importance of passing the exams. This is emphasised more by the teachers of higher grades in elementary school, such as Leo, Dorothy, Daisy and Cheng, given that students in Grades 5–6 will sit the secondary school entrance examination, where getting higher marks can take them to the top schools. Therefore, these teachers focus on grammatical accuracy, which they believe can be achieved

only through paper-based exercises, more than on communicative competence.

Noticeably, the current curriculum of English teaching in China aims to develop students' communicative competence and encourage them to communicate in the target language. What is more, the guidebooks that help teachers obtain teaching qualifications emphasise CLT and task-based teaching approaches. As the participants who are young teachers and have been guided by the new curriculum all pass the teaching examination through self-learning, they should have a systematic knowledge of CLT, which is the approach encouraged by the education ministry. However, according to the interviews, the participants are unclear about the principles in some respects; in practice, most adopt the traditional language teaching method in class in order to help students achieve higher grades. Thus, based on the imbalance between the curriculum and teachers' knowledge and practice, the teachers should accept training and adapt CLT to the exam-based language learning in China.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The study interviews elementary school teachers to investigate their cognition of CLT in several main features – interaction, active learners, meaningful activities, authenticity, fluency and error correction – and analyse these from a linguistic perspective. The results indicate that the teachers show positive attitudes towards the CLT approach. However, in practice, they still adopt the traditional language teaching method for two reasons: a lack of knowledge of CLT and the exam-oriented Chinese learning situation. Thus, the research indicates that teachers should receive systematic training in CLT and the real reform in English language teaching. The study is limited by the fact that teachers' practice was not directly observed; their practice was presented only through teachers' own accounts in the interviews.

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