

Traditional Chinese Language Teaching Revisited: The Example of Recitation

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Abstract—Recitation is a traditional practice in Chinese literacy education and later was transferred to English Language Teaching (ELT) in China. This article, taking the example of recitation, conducts an analysis of traditional Chinese language teaching which is expected to yield implications for current ELT in China. This research has reached the conclusion that certain aspects of traditional language teaching might be relevant to modern situation in ELT.

Index Terms—traditional language teaching, China, recitation

I. INTRODUCTION

Recitation is, from the contemporary western point of view, a traditional but outmoded pedagogical practice. In early western documentation, Chinese learners, were usually portrayed as passive, imitative memorisers, as is described below:

... they memorate[sic], they hear the Chinese explanation, and this goes on from morning to night for years, and they get the classics into them. (1882 Education Commission's interview with the Bishop of Victoria, cited in Pennycook, 1996)

Western teachers in China have more often than not responded to recitation by Chinese students with derision and scorn (Sampson, 1984). For instance, dating back to the 19th century, a western educator named Frederick Steward (1865 cited in Pennycook, 1996) thought that 'the Chinese have no education in the real sense of the word', because the development of mental powers were 'all sacrificed to the cultivation of memory'. From this viewpoint, recitation seems to be seriously irreconcilable with modern education. As we have seen, Lips (1949) stated that, without the benefits of education, our civilisation would be reduced to laying more stress on a good memory. This implies that the most progressive forms of education may involve little recitation while emphasis on memory is considered as primitive or backward. Echoing this perception, some Western scholars equate recitation with rote learning. For instance, statements are found such as: 'Rote learning is recitation' (Cohen & Feigenbaum, 1982). In this sense, Chinese education relying heavily on recitation and Chinese learners cast as rote-memorisers need to be enlightened by the ideas of the creative West because the Chinese way of learning is inferior to the Western way, a corollary resulting from the stereotyping view that the Chinese are rote learners (Wen, 1997)

Scepticism among Western teachers and methodologists on the purpose of extensive use of recitation in foreign language learning and teaching (as is the case in China) has not ceased. The Chinese mastery of English through recitation is commonly characterised as 'rather quaint, a misguided use of effort and a barrier to communication'¹ (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 185). When Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) failed to make the expected impact on ELT in the Chinese context (Hu, 2002; Rao, 1996), recitation, the most salient feature in the Chinese way of learning English, has become a convenient practice to blame for its suppression of Chinese students' communicative competence. Thus it is rarely mentioned in English textbooks or discussed in foreign language education journals as if it is the causal factor of the current situation of ELT in China – which a Chinese education official has described as 'time-consuming but of low efficiency' (L.-Q. Li, 2003). Is recitation the major culprit which bears responsibility for any unsatisfactory outcome of ELT in China, a country with an enormous population and a very short history of English teaching?

II. CURRENT SITUATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA

Above all things, it is questionable whether ELT in China is 'time-consuming and inefficient' (L.-Q. Li, 2003) given the limited English class time (about 4 class hours a week, 18 weeks a term, for 12 terms in high school and 4 terms at university) and the EFL context (where little English is to be encountered outside the classroom). Such an amount of class time may be 'just enough to help students understand how the language works, it does not allow them to practice using it' (Liu, 1998, p. 5; see also Q. Li, 1994). Moreover, as a result of stringent controls on access to international media by the Chinese government, the Chinese students have little exposure to up-to-date information directly from English-speaking countries that may provide a language model for them to follow and give them a flavour of the culture

¹ It needs to be pointed out that this is not the opinion of Cortazzi & Jin who just quoted commonly held Western interpretations of Chinese way of English learning. The context of this quotation is this: 'Chinese students' undoubted achievement in acquiring an advance knowledge of grammar or memorising many English words is seen by Western teachers as being primarily a negative factor: ...'(Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 185).

of those countries. Other constraining contextual factors, including large class sizes, limited resources and equipment, lack of competent teachers, and particularly the absence of a test of oral English due to a long-term neglect of oral skills, may provide a more reasonable account of Chinese students' insufficiency in communicative competence than their experience of memorising texts.

ELT in China over the past decades is 'undoubtedly successful in its own terms' (Burnaby & Sun, 1989, p. 229) given that China is culturally and geographically distant from the English-speaking world and that the Chinese language is typologically distant from English language; as we have seen, ELT has a very short history in China, which has been disrupted by political events or upheavals and decades of isolation from western countries. An English major who has only studied within China, as observed by an American expert (Nida, 1984; cited in Ding, 1987), often has a better command of the language than the average American college graduate has of a foreign language which he or she has majored in and studied only in America.

Chinese investment of effort in mastery of English through recitation, which may give them a sense of progress and achievement, crucial to morale, may not necessarily be in opposition to a change towards a more communicative direction. To explain why extensive use of recitation inherited from traditional language teaching is not inconsistent with creative use of language, in the following section, I shall conduct a positive evaluation of certain relevant principles salient in traditional language teaching.

III. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM TRADITIONAL CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHING?

One caveat I have to mention prior to proceeding further is that my analyses in this section focuses more on the positive aspects of traditional language learning than on the problems. This may make me appear overly enthusiastic about Chinese tradition and blind to modern values in Western language education. Needless to say, there are many problems in traditional language teaching, just as there are obvious virtues and strengths in modern Western pedagogical theories. With no pretense of offering a balanced assessment of the strong points and weaknesses of traditional Chinese and modern Western language education theory, my goal in this article, however, is to explore what essence we can extract from traditional Chinese language teaching which can be drawn on appropriately in our current effort to direct our foreign language teaching towards western approaches.

Traditional language teaching in China, according to Z.-G. Zhang (1983), refers to 'the sort of language teaching conducted in China between the Song Dynasty (960 A.D.) until the middle of the 19th century'², that is, the literacy-focused teaching of the *wenyan*³ version of Chinese. From fragmentary written records and historical film clips, we are easily imprinted with the impression that traditional language education treated students like machines who had to passively and mechanically accept whatever was instilled without understanding. Indeed, there are many traditional guidelines or practices which are seriously irrelevant to contemporary language teaching especially those connected with the 'eight-legged' essay or *baguwen*⁴. Recognition of this, however, should not blind us to the fact that there were certainly valuable experience in and sensible precepts underlying traditional Chinese language teaching that are worth inheriting.

First and foremost, traditional Chinese literacy education never failed to emphasise the paramount importance of wide reading. As the Chinese saying goes, 'He who reads ten thousand books thoroughly can work wonders with his pen.' [*du shu po wan quan, xia bi ru you shen*] It was believed that only through wide reading could one be capable of good writing. In addition to extensive reading, intensive reading was also highly valued. In order for the students to internalise the language material, traditional language teaching demanded that some classic writings be intensively studied and recited to the extent that they could be recalled effortlessly at any time. Meanwhile, the importance of plenty of practice with language (e.g. constantly composing poems, verses or prose) was not neglected. So 'read plenty and write plenty'⁵ became an established maxim in traditional language teaching. Quite obviously, the Chinese ancestral scholars' insistence on the command of a rich linguistic resource through abundant exposure (either through wide reading or intensive recitation) and on the engagement with output (writing) has considerable justification even examined under modern theories of language and literacy development. More importantly, reading was not simply study and recitation of texts for examinations, rather, understanding should become an integral part of meaningful reading. As Zhu Xi (1130-1200) put it,

In learning we have to read for ourselves, so that the understanding we reach is personally meaningful. Nowadays, however, people read simply for the sake of the civil service examinations ... reading must be an experience personally meaningful to the self ... (translation from Gardner, 1990, pp. 17, 148)

Another prominent value in traditional Chinese language teaching is that it attached great importance to students' 'independent thinking as a pre-requisite to reading and writing development' (Zhang, 1983, p. 8). This attribute has long been ignored because it was made vague and ambiguous by the unanimous attack on the 'eight-legged' essay and

² The time span is roughly in line with the period of imperial civil service examination system.

³ *wenyan* is an older version of written Chinese which is drastically different from vernacular and oral-focused *baihua* version used today.

⁴ To quote Kang You-Wei, a reformer in late Qing Dynasty, 'those who learn *baguwen* read no books published after Qin and Han Dynasty, know nothing about practices in foreign states ...'. (cited in T. Li, 2008, p. 65)

⁵ Traditional language teaching takes as its goal of the improvement of only reading and writing (Zhang, 1983), which has a far-reaching impact on language teaching in China, either it being Chinese or foreign language.

imperial civil service examinations as well as overenthusiastic worship of authority which characterised traditional language education. Moreover, presumably people became teachers through an apprenticeship model so that there was a dearth of systematic exposition and coherent theories of language teaching throughout the hundreds of years.

In essence, there are many examples throughout ancient Chinese literature of cultivating independence of mind. Confucius, for example, advised his students to ‘be learned, ask questions, think carefully and discriminate’ [*boxue, shenwen, zhensi, mingbian*]⁶, which is apparently another evidence of his unwavering emphasis on the importance of critical thinking in learning. The Confucian sense of learning involved continuous effort of fostering independence of mind and a willingness to doubt others’ views as well as one’s own preconceived ideas: ‘In reading don’t force your ideas in the text. You must get rid of your own idea ...’; ‘... the student must first of all know how to doubt’ (Gardner, 1990, p. 46)⁷.

Teachers, on the other hand, were supposed to enable the students to achieve their genuine mastery by guiding the students to sense the elusive meaning implied in the reading materials rather than demanding that they follow parrot-fashion through rote recitation. The pre-Confucius *Liji* classic famously links ‘a good teacher’ with guiding students to think for themselves:

In his teaching, the superior man ... opens the way, but does not take them to the place. ... opening the way without leading the students to the place makes them think for themselves. Now if the process of learning is made gentle and easy and the students are encouraged to think for themselves, we may call the man a good teacher. (translation from Lin, 1938, p. 247)

Historically, up to the Ming and Qing periods, writers heaped scorn on pedants who blindly followed the past (Zhang, 1983). It was the deep understanding and synthesis, systemisation or integration of the material that Chinese scholars meant to achieve through extensive reading or intensive recitation. This conception is displayed in the expression going like ‘*ru hu qi nei, chu hu qi wai*’ [literally meaning ‘going into the material in order to get out of it’]. This is to say, punctilious study of the material is aiming to eventually achieve a holistic mastery of it.

Summing up, developing a rich command of language resources through persistent accumulation and constant practice seems to be a positive theme in traditional Chinese language teaching. More importantly, cultivating students’ independent or creative thinking in reading was seen as essential to enabling them to take full control of the material available for their own use. Clearly, amassing large amounts of linguistic resources without neglecting independent thinking or creative reflection is a positive experience which we can learn from.

Unfortunately, over the past hundred years or so, some rational language teaching principles such as I have mentioned above have either not received the attention they deserve in foreign language education or have been misunderstood and therefore misused in transferring them to current foreign language teaching. One example is the traditional practice of recitation of contextual material, which is often misused in foreign language teaching in China. The students may be forced to memorise verbatim a text designated by the teacher simply for the purpose of reproducing it in examinations, or fulfilling an assignment without being afforded a chance later to use what they have gained from the painstaking task. In addition, little effort may be made on the part of the teacher to guide the students to appreciate or enjoy the beauty of the language per se. Thus, on top of being demotivated in foreign language learning, Chinese students become used to an introverted and conservative approach to learning, unable to use English as an effective communicative tool, reluctant to engage in critical or independent thinking, and happy to be a passive receivers of knowledge (Rao, 1996).

When some prestigious officials in education made reference on how traditional education practices discourage students’ creative thinking, text recitation seems to be among the first factors to be blamed. Worrying about being regarded as old-fashioned, textbook compilers are prudent in assigning texts for students to memorise. For instance, learning texts by heart is rarely mentioned in high school English textbooks and only occasionally required in the exercises following the text in Chinese language textbooks⁸. Language teaching specialists and researchers are cautious in talking about it presumably because they believe it is dismissed in the progressive West as primitive or misguided or because it has not been endowed with a sensible theoretical justification. Facing the predicament of failing to get satisfactory outcome of ELT in China despite enormous investment, especially under the pressure of criticism from government officials, Chinese educators may hasten to stay away from any learning practice imprinted with palpable traditional marks.

IV. THE PARADOX OF CHINESE LEARNERS

What some western researchers (e.g. Biggs, 1991; Cooper, 2004; Watkins & Biggs, 2001) consider to be the so-called paradox of Chinese learners is that Chinese learners achieve their equally often reported academic success apparently by using rote strategies and surface learning approaches. On the one hand, they are held up as paragons of educational

⁶ The complete quote goes like, *boxue, shenwen, zhensi, mingbian, duxing* (from *The Doctrine of the Mean*). Zhu Xi (1130-1200) elaborated each phrase as the proper sequence of five steps for learning from any worthwhile text: ‘Study it extensively, question its meaning precisely, ponder it with full vigilance, scrutinize its distinctions with clarity of vision, practice it in all earnestness’ (Plaks, 2003: 42).

⁷ Gardener is quoting Zhuxi (1130-1200) here.

⁸ The textbook series under examination are those published in 1990 by People’s Education Press affiliated with Ministry of Education. They have been used by an overwhelming majority of secondary schools throughout China.

excellence, while on the other hand, they are derided as rote learners (Biggs, 1991). How is it possible that students with an orientation to rote learning, which is negatively correlated with achievement (cf. Biggs, 1979), achieve so highly? In the case of foreign language learning, the paradox becomes this: Chinese students were learning 'rather more effectively than they "should" have been, given what Western research predicted to be counter-productive teaching/learning environments' (Watkins & Biggs, 2001, p. preface; see also Watkins & Biggs, 1996). This paradox can only be solved by exploring what Chinese learners actually do when they memorise.

One particular aspect of the 'paradox of the Chinese learner' is the relationship between recitation and understanding. Chinese students are perceived as passive rote learners, yet show high levels of understanding (Watkins & Biggs, 2001, p. 3).

Two opposing findings emerged from the considerable bulk of documents discussing this issue. While earlier documentation often describes Chinese learners as rote learners who learn mechanically without meaningful understanding (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Samuelowicz, 1987), literature in the last decade or so has seen numerous expressions of a contrary argument, namely, 'what from the outside looks like mere rote learning is then in reality a combination of both recitation and understanding' (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000, p. 67; see also Cooper, 2004; Kennedy, 2002; Marton, Dall'Alba, et al., 1996; Marton, Wen, et al., 1996; Marton et al., 2005). Tweed and Lehman refute what they describe as the western instructor's belief that Chinese students adopt a shallow, rote-learning approach on the ground that 'Chinese students often use recitation not as an end in itself but as a path to understanding' (2002, p. 93). Similarly, Lee (1996) argues that recitation may be the best way to become familiar with a text for Chinese learners in the sense that it is just a stage in the learning process, preceding understanding rather than stopping at rote learning.

Thus viewed, it is argued that recitation is seldom separated from understanding for learners of Confucian heritage culture (CHC)⁹, hence the conception of 'meaningful understanding' (Marton, Wen, & Nagle, 1996). The two subcomponents identified under this label are 'memorising what is understood' and 'understanding through recitation' (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Tse, 1996, p. 77). Summing up, different from the common Western thinking that recitation and understanding are antithetical, Chinese students consider recitation and understanding to be closely related and it is normal practice for them to try to understand and memorise simultaneously. The fact that many Chinese students are able to combine the processes of recitation and understanding in a way that Western students seldom do (cf. Kember, 1996; Marton, Dall'Alba, et al., 1996; Marton, Watkins, & Tang, 1997; Wen & Marton, 1993) may help explain another aspect of the 'paradox' of Chinese learners: they report in both qualitative and quantitative investigations that they are trying to understand what they are learning while their Western teachers consider them as mere learners by rote (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000).

V. CONCLUSION

While overuse or misuse of recitation can admittedly be detrimental to the cultivation of mind to some extent, some contemporary researchers (e.g. Biggs, 1996; Sampson, 1984) have argued that recitation should be carefully re-examined. According to Pennycook, there is a need to seek different possibilities in 'how language, texts, and recitation may be understood' (1996, p. 222).

Indiscriminately deleting all learning habits inherited from traditional language education can be as injurious as obstinately clinging on to those language teaching traditions which prove seriously irrelevant to modern situation (for example, overemphasis on the teaching of Classical Chinese (Zhang, 1983)). We should not be blind to the fact that a number of recent research studies have documented the use of text recitation by high-achieving Chinese English learners (Gao, 2007; Gu, 2003). In fact, an increasing number of contemporary Western researchers (e.g., Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) have recognised that recitation, a highly valued way of learning in the Far East, can lead to high levels of understanding if applied appropriately. Chinese students' inadequacy in oral communication may rather lie in the fact that oral skills have long been neglected and a main emphasis has been placed on the improvement of reading and writing (Zhang, 1983) than in the practice of text recitation which is assumed to stifle the creative use of language.

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⁹ In their in-depth interviews with 20 students, Marton et al. (2005) also reported, apart from 'recitation that succeeds understanding', there also exists the type of 'recitation that precedes understanding' which means, the learner rote-memorise in the first instance in order to understand later.

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