The Trend and Challenge for Teaching EFL at Taiwanese Universities
Gi-Zen Liu
RELC Journal 2005 36: 211
DOI: 10.1177/0033688205055575

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://rel.sagepub.com/content/36/2/211

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for RELC Journal can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://rel.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://rel.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://rel.sagepub.com/content/36/2/211.refs.html
THE TREND AND CHALLENGE FOR TEACHING EFL AT TAIWANESE UNIVERSITIES*

Gi-Zen Liu

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature
National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan
gizenliu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The author first talks about the current situation of teaching EFL in higher education institutions in Taiwan, and indicates that the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach has been the most popular language teaching approach lately. Then he addresses the hybrid course approach which seems to be a trend as well as an appropriate way for teaching English. Despite the popularity of CLT, the situation regarding implementation of CLT in Taiwanese higher education institutions is complex. The author discusses the background of Taiwanese EFL instructors, the contradictory findings about EFL learners’ preferences and needs, and the existing English learning problem among college students in the effort to provide a solution. In addition, he emphasizes the implementation and application of the Internet in Taiwan for facilitating e-learning and English learning with the adaptation of instructor’s role and student’s role when using CLT at Taiwanese universities in the Internet age.

The Current Situation of Teaching EFL in Taiwanese Higher Education Institutions

Today the English language has become a major medium used in international communication for many purposes. English is also the world’s most widely studied, read, and spoken foreign language (Kachru and Nelson 1996), as it has been the dominant language of education, commerce, communication, science, technology, and entertainment in the
global village (Richards and Rodgers 2001; Warschauer 2000). The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach has been common in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs at Taiwanese universities in recent years. Currently at most universities in Taiwan, EFL is usually taught by local instructors while at few universities (e.g. Tunghai University), native speakers of English play an important role in teaching Freshman English. All college freshmen in Taiwan are required to take ‘Freshman English’ or ‘University English’ focusing on reading and writing, as well as ‘Lab English’, focusing on listening and speaking. In Freshman English, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach has become well accepted among EFL instructors. In a CLT oriented classroom, students are given various opportunities to engage in communications in the target language—the instructor works as a class facilitator/coordinator (Richards and Rodgers 2001) to prepare students for active learning—through interactive, communicative learning tasks (e.g. discussion, play).

At the same time, traditional language-teaching methods are still being used by some instructors. In a traditional language classroom, the instructor stands in front of students in a classroom, using the Grammar-Translation Method to teach students directly from textbooks. The instructor uses Chinese (the official language) to explain the grammar and meaning of the EFL texts, and the students are asked to translate English sentences to Chinese, or vice versa. In Lab English, the instructor often uses the Audiolingual method to ask students to listen to audiotapes or watch videotapes to develop their listening and speaking skills. Students are also asked to practice dialogues from textbooks led by the instructor, and sometimes they are asked to practice speaking English in pairs or in small groups to develop their speaking fluency.

According to a Taiwanese government-sponsored research report, ‘Are Freshman English Programs for Non-English Majors at Universities in Taiwan Meeting the Expectation of Students and Teachers?’ (Huang 1998), most non-English-major freshmen think English is important for them; however, they would prefer fewer class hours of ‘University English’ than they are required to take. In contrast, EFL instructors and university graduates prefer freshmen to take more class hours in order to help non-English-major freshmen improve their English ability for the sake of their overall academic performance. The result of this review suggests that ‘University English’ for non-English-major freshmen offered at most universities in Taiwan ‘might have not been successful enough to
motivate students to want more of these courses’ (Huang 1998: 209). There appears to be a need for EFL instructors and course designers to figure out a way to improve current TEFL teaching approaches in higher education institutions in Taiwan. The findings in Huang’s (1998) report suggest that the alternative of more class hours of ‘Lab English’ can be offered to meet the needs of some students. The author suggested all college instructors should attend some workshops or study current language teaching methods to improve their English teaching.

To draw a conclusion from this research, it appears that the majority of non-English-major freshmen in Taiwan prefer more class hours and opportunities for listening and speaking, but fewer class hours for reading and writing in their EFL classrooms (Huang 1998). Taiwanese EFL instructors need to positively address the finding by providing balanced, sound instruction to include Web-based instruction (WBI) for college students to develop their English in the Internet age. Meanwhile, the Republic of China (ROC) Government in Taiwan states that it has been trying to accomplish the three major goals: ‘achieving excellence within higher education’, ‘promoting foreign language learning’, and ‘completing the subsidizing plan for a [computer-]networking environment for 100% of all schools’ (Ministry of Education of the ROC 1999). The ROC Government is trying to combine foreign language learning and networked computer-mediated instruction to establish learning contexts for EFL and other foreign languages on the Internet as aids to classroom instruction in higher education institutions.

The Hybrid Course Approach as a Trend for Teaching EFL

As language learning cannot take place without a context where learners interact with other more competent language users for a variety of purposes (Goodman 1990), the use of the hybrid course approach (Ko and Rossen 2001), which uses WBI as an aid to a classroom course, for teaching EFL may help universities and colleges in Taiwan achieve their instructional objectives. This is because a hybrid course provides a classroom learning context and a virtual learning context on the Internet. A virtual learning context on the Internet enables EFL learners to study English without the restraint of time and place, and they can communicate with the teacher and other learners synchronously and asynchronously. Thus, not only can students potentially develop their English skills, but they also can understand the textbooks or Web pages written in English in
order to develop their academic performance as well as to compete with other people in this Internet age.

In addition, the so-called ‘Internet revolution’ is changing the way that people learn and teach. For example, ‘e-learning’ is a popular term describing the way that people learn through the Internet. Rosenberg indicates that ‘with e-learning, we’re not just introducing new technology for learning—we are introducing a new way to think about learning’ (Rosenberg 2001: 31). Therefore, EFL instructors need to think about how to make advantage of the Internet to help learners’ development of English in conjunction with CLT in a hybrid context. Despite the popularity of CLT, the situation regarding implementation of CLT in Taiwanese higher education institutions is complex. At the same time, despite its claimed scientific applied linguistics theoretical basis, CLT is essentially a product of American culture (Shing 2001).

EFL Instructors at Taiwanese Universities

In terms of teaching EFL in Taiwan, most local and foreign EFL professors and instructors at Taiwanese universities are graduates from American universities, who have received or understood American culture and viewpoints in language education. For example, 77% of EFL professors and instructors at National Taiwan University have a graduate school degree from American universities. Following a similar trend, 85% of the EFL faculty at National Taiwan Normal University, 74% at National Chengchi University, 78% at Tunghai University, and 100% at National Chiao Tung University also have graduate school degrees from American universities (calculated from information respectively at their department Web sites). It is no wonder that CLT, which originated and prevails in North America, is now endorsed by Taiwanese language education scholars and practitioners as an effective approach to improve the communicative competence of students (Shing 2001).

Contradictory Findings about Taiwanese EFL Learners and their Implication

In terms of learning EFL, there are contradictory findings on students’ preferences and needs. On the one hand, Huang (1998) found that some non-English-major freshmen in Taiwan prefer more class hours and opportunities for listening and speaking. In fact, most Taiwanese students are
aware of the importance of balanced development of their English ability (Huang 1998) in order to compete with other students in this American English- and technology-dominated global village (Warschauer 2000). On the other hand, most Taiwanese students do not feel comfortable speaking English frequently in class. According to a study (Yao 1995), some students do not feel comfortable in frequent, interactive oral communication. Therefore, efforts to improve communicative competence are being met with limited success. Taiwanese students appear to be uncooperative and uncommunicative in an EFL classroom (Evans 1999). This contradiction, in my opinion, reflects the complexity within students’ adaptation to the American culture-based CLT within the Taiwanese culture, which is dominated by traditional Chinese culture and values, but is also influenced by Western (mostly American) cultures and values. Some students are aware of the importance of speaking up but feel it difficult to really do so. Some Taiwanese EFL scholars view the conflict as the disagreement between newly advanced application of language teaching and Taiwanese traditional education and viewpoints (Shing 2001). Evans (1999) indicates the five Chinese rules of speaking may influence the way that learners think and act when they develop their English:

- ‘Implicit communication
- Listen-centeredness
- Politeness
- A focus on insiders
- Face-directed communication strategies’

(Evans 1999: 4).

Among the above five rules, implicit communication, listen-centeredness, and face-directed communication strategies are most related to Taiwanese students’ resistance to CLT. That is because they do not want to be embarrassed when they do not know how to express themselves in speaking English properly. Furthermore, Evans (1999) points out that Chinese culture can be generalized as a collectivist intent on harmony and conflict reduction.

To maintain harmony within the group, it is essential both to save face and to show respect. For this reason, the typical Chinese native speaker maintains a more listener-centered attitude within communication. Speaking out of turn is considered to be struggling for power and authority… People only voice their opinions when they are given recognition (Evans 1999: 4).
Shing (2001) also recognizes ‘saving face’ as the major obstacle when some Taiwanese students are asked to communicate orally in English. Specifically, in EFL learning, Taiwanese freshman students are used to the lecturing style that their high school teacher used in EFL. So when they become college freshmen, it seems that they find it difficult to adjust themselves to the use of CLT in Freshman English.

The Challenge of Tackling the Problem

Concerns about the conflict between the use of CLT in EFL programs at universities and the Taiwanese tradition of education and culture continue to be expressed by other researchers. The article written by Shing (2001) is critical and points out the dilemma Taiwanese universities have been facing. However, few studies provide a practical guide that instructors can follow to solve this problem. The reason that this challenge is discussed widely but tackled by few people is that it involves a change that cannot be solved by one group of people alone. Language education is situated in the educational system, which is further situated within the cultural, historical, economic, social, and political environment. Difficulty in changing one element in the language education system might stem from factors in the larger environment, which cannot be controlled by language educators alone. Inside the educational system, due to the necessity of taking the National College Entrance Examination before entering a university or college, EFL teachers and students in Taiwan are explicitly forced to concentrate on the development of reading and writing abilities. At the societal level, Taiwan has been witnessing rapid economic growth and internationalization. This island is under the dual influence of Western cultures and Chinese traditional culture. Both Taiwanese EFL instructors and students are experiencing a transition.

Efforts to Tackle the Problem

In this situation, what can language educators do? What can EFL teachers do to help Taiwanese students deal with the above situation and develop communicative competence in a foreign language that enables them to successfully engage in authentic communication with people all over the world and to sustain their cultural identity and integrity? As a researcher of instructional technology and EFL instruction, I do not expect to change the situation in a short period of time. What I can do is to promote efforts
not only to discuss, but also to solve, this issue collaboratively. I think EFL programs at Taiwanese universities should integrate:

- newly advanced Western language teaching approaches or ideas (e.g. CLT, *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning 1996*);
- sensibility to the ‘cultural construct’ (Evans 1999) and expectation to communication by providing careful scaffolding for students instead of expecting students to speak up spontaneously, guiding students into critical comparison of cultural difference in language instead of imposing Western communication cultures upon students uniformly; and
- the hybrid course approach, computer technology, and especially the Internet.

In addition for Taiwanese EFL educators to provide a solution to teach EFL in a hybrid course, in the following I talk about (a) the implementation of Internet at Taiwanese universities and schools for facilitating e-learning and EFL learning, (b) students’ role under the guidance of CLT when learning English, and (c) instructors’ role in teaching EFL by using CLT.

**The Implementation of the Internet in Taiwan for Facilitating E-learning**

Specifically, I see the Internet as the entry point to tackle the cultural issue that has been discussed earlier. First, Taiwanese universities have the mandate to make the Internet accessible to their students. In fact, since 1990, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan has established the Taiwan Academic Network (TANET) to connect the Internet among all universities and colleges to support and facilitate research and instruction. Later, the TANET has been expanded to all levels of schools in Taiwan. The ROC Government in Taiwan has been devoted to the development of digital learning and to the enhancement of national competitiveness in the information age.

Taiwan has been promoting the use of e-learning and has achieved the goal to a certain degree. One example is that the National Taiwan University won the First Award at the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers’ (IEEE) Computer Society 4th Annual International Design Competition (CSIDC) in 2003. Interested readers may go to the Web...

Taiwanese elementary schools won five out of eight Platinum Awards in 2003. They also won four of the same awards last year. Pupils will soon become college students, and the frequent use of the Internet now will help them feel comfortable in e-learning in both computer labs and wireless contexts. These facts indicate that not only Taiwanese college students but elementary school students are getting used to the e-learning environment and developing their knowledge and skills via the Internet. Further, Taiwanese students are taking advantage of the Internet and e-learning environment to introduce Taiwan to and exchange information with other people all over the world.

In addition, the ROC Government (especially the National Science Council and the Ministry of Education) is promoting the use of the hybrid course approach for teaching EFL and other foreign languages in higher education institutions. More importantly, the Internet has large numbers of resources in English, which provide more opportunities for reading authentic English, as well as synchronous and asynchronous communication tools that provide alternative communication opportunities. If guided properly, students can engage in active communication mediated by computer, which helps them to overcome their listening-centeredness and to enhance a more even interaction between learner and learner as well as between learner and instructor. It is also possible for learners to be anonymous in computer mediated communication (CMC), which can help Taiwanese students overcome their hesitancy to communicate due to the need for saving face.

**Students’ Role under the Guidance of CLT when Learning EFL in Taiwan**

Taiwanese students should play an active role of learner and knowledge-builder when learning English. Freshman students need to understand the EFL learning activities and possible problems informed by the instructor when guided with CLT. Taiwanese students should learn to adjust themselves to the communicative, interpersonal learning activities in both the classroom and Web-based environments. Taiwanese freshman students need to develop their communicative competence and open their minds to
accept CLT. In addition, as suggested by Richards and Rodgers (1986, 2001), when guided with CLT, students need to learn to be active negotiators of meaning in the learning process and learning environment with other classmates/learners. Freshman students in Taiwan need to develop their mindsets to do so.

**Instructors’ Role in Teaching EFL by Using CLT in Taiwan**

Richards and Rodgers (1986, 2001) suggest that when using CLT, the instructor should work as a facilitator—to assist students in the learning processes—in every way he/she can. The authors also suggest that the instructor should guide students in learning activities that utilize his/her learning experiences, knowledge, and abilities of analysis and organization. Therefore, Taiwanese EFL instructors need to work towards these objectives when teaching Freshman English in hybrid environments by using CLT. In addition, the Taiwanese instructor needs to identify the cultural differences on teaching English, and adjust himself/herself to an appropriate position that balances the two different cultures when doing so. The EFL instructor should inform students of the cultural differences (e.g. more interpersonal communication, more negotiation of meaning when necessary), and students need to get used to the guidance of CLT.

Furthermore, when instructors can identify the differences between the two cultures (Western and Chinese) on teaching English and take a proper position in doing so, they must make up their minds to believe and accept what data (cultural differences) recommends and follow the suggestions. At the same time, the instructor needs to be flexible (Omaggio-Hadley 2001) on the way he/she teaches English. The instructor can do so by means of evaluating students’ learning results in their reflection papers, online discussions, and individual guidance in office hours.

In sum, the Internet, which is a new medium providing various communication tools not tied to an old tradition, might provide a new venue for Taiwanese students to open up to a different communication world. Especially with the integration of synchronous communication, which goes beyond the classroom time and space, the guidance of CLT in Freshman English and other EFL curricula at Taiwanese universities would provide a vital compensation for the inadequate emphasis on listening and speaking when students receive their six-year EFL education in high schools. Taiwanese EFL instructors and college freshmen need to learn to adjust themselves to CLT, and learn to accept new ideas/methods in teaching and learning English.
Conclusion

Since the hybrid course approach is new in the field of instruction, and new Web-based tools are constantly emerging, it has become a significant issue to discover how to make good use of these new Web tools as well as to incorporate them into a WBI environment for teaching EFL. To make this hybrid course approach viable, a range of methods are needed for teaching EFL in higher education institutions in Taiwan. It also raises some questions that need to be answered. For example, what should TEFL programs at Taiwanese universities and colleges look like in the Internet age? How should university TEFL programs organize instruction when adopting a hybrid course design for teaching EFL in Taiwan? What type of EFL curriculum should be provided for college freshmen to further develop the four language skills for academic competency in a hybrid course? What methods should EFL instructors employ to teach English in a hybrid course? EFL curriculum developers need to think about these questions and try to answer them when they teach EFL. Specifically, the Internet-based learning environment is used as an extension of the classroom that provides more language and culture resources and more opportunities for authentic communication, in-depth discussion, and students’ collaboration. EFL instructors at Taiwanese universities should take advantage of the hybrid course approach to create more EFL learning opportunities and developmental challenges. The integrative application of the Internet and the classroom learning context will help Taiwanese students become proficient in communicating in both written and oral forms of English in the information age.

REFERENCES

Evans, J.

Goodman, Y.

Huang, S.Y.
Kachru, B.B., and C.L. Nelson

Ko, S., and S. Rossen

Ministry of Education, the Republic of China

Omaggio-Hadley, A.
2001 Teaching Language in Context (Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle).

Richards, J.C., and T.S. Rodgers

Rosenberg, M.J.

Shing, P.

Warschauer, M.

Yao, T.K.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

* I am grateful to Charles M. Reigeluth, Martha Nyikos and Xiaojing Kou for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Part of this paper is the result of the research project—An Instructional Design Theory and its Applications for Teaching Freshman English in a Hybrid Web-based Instruction Course in Taiwan (NSC 93-2411-H-029-014)—funded by the National Science Council, Taiwan, R.O.C.