

# **What Else after “How are you?” – Reflections on Methodologies of English Teaching in Taiwan**

Wen-Shuenn Wu

Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature,  
Chung Hua University

## **Abstract**

It seems to be a general consensus, for most English teachers who have been teaching English in university-level institutes in Taiwan for more than a decade, that students' linguistic competence or communicative proficiency has been deteriorated rapidly or at best has been shown statistically as bimodal distribution in terms of their language achievement. It is understandable that most students who received English instruction dominated by the Grammar-Translation Method about 20 years ago might not produce fluent spoken discourse and accurate written texts. However, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a method focused on the process of effective communication rather than the mastery of linguistic forms, has been prevalent in Taiwan in the past 10 years. It appears that the pedagogical results are not fruitful. In addition, more and more language schools or cram schools offer better English learning environments for learners or at least give students great opportunities to use English to interact with their English teachers, most of whom are native speakers of English. Nevertheless, most English learners in Taiwan seem to get stuck in their “silent period” stage even after they have learned English “communicatively” for a couple of years. This paper is going to first summarize the principle of three major language teaching methods – CLT, The Natural Approach, and Multiple Intelligence, followed by challenges and criticism of these methods. Finally, it will conclude with the author's personal reflection on current English teaching methods.

**Key Words:** Communicative Language Teaching, the Natural Approach, Multiple Intelligences, motivation

# 在“你好嗎?”之後呢 – 對臺灣在英語教學法的省思

吳文舜

中華大學外國語文學系講師

## 摘要

對在臺灣大專院校教授英語超過 10 年以上的老師而言，應該都有一個共同的體驗，就是大學生的英語溝通能力和流利度都快速下滑。或者從統計數據來看，學生在語言成就的表現而言，充其量是呈現「雙峰現象」。20 年前左右，臺灣英語教學幾乎都以「文法翻譯法」(Grammar-Translation Method) 爲主的時候，當時培養訓練出來的學生無法講出流利的英語和寫出順暢的英文是可以理解的。然而，以有效溝通爲主而並不強調語言外在形式的「溝通語言教學法」(Communicative Language Teaching) 在臺灣也已經盛行 10 年以上，但是似乎教學成果還不是很有效。此外，越來越多的語言學校或補習班提供學生優良的語言學習環境，或者至少給學生更多和外籍老師溝通互動的機會。然而，大多數臺灣學生在學習「溝通式」的英語數年之後，似乎依然停頓在語言學習的「沉默階段」(silent period)。此篇論文將摘要三種目前流行的英語教學法：「溝通語言教學法」(Communicative Language Teaching)、「自然教學法」(The Natural Approach)、和「多元智能教學法」(Multiple Intelligences)，再討論這三種教學法所面臨的挑戰和批評。最後，以作者對臺灣英語教學現狀的省思做爲結論。

**關鍵詞：** 溝通語言教學法、自然教學法、多元智能教學法、動機

## Introduction

It is no doubt that English has become a major language of international communication. Learning English seems to be a nationwide campaign here in Taiwan. For example, in May 2002 our former Premier Yu announced that English will become a “semi-official” language after the so-called “six-year national construction plan” is finished. However, three years has passed since this announcement and it seems that this all-English goal is going to be a mission impossible. People with common sense know that a foreign language policy formulated and imposed by government is doomed to failure. As opposed to the distant dream cherished by former Premier Yu, many students in Taiwan have considered English learning as a nightmare and have had decreasing English level. According to a piece of news reported by United Daily News on November 7, 2003<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Min-Ning Yu, a professor of Department of Education in National Cheng Chi University, pointed out that around 32% of his test participants obtained a score lower than 410 in a paper-based TOEFL, which is equivalent to the English proficiency of students in the third year of junior high schools. Although the result analysis was based on a loosely controlled sampling as Dr. Yu confessed, it may not reflect the real phenomenon of English learning and teaching in Taiwan. However, the data collected definitely give warning signals that we can not ignore.

Many language experts also have another worry about our current English learning. When most students have unsatisfactory or even frustrating English competence, a few of them have fluent or even native-like command of English. The statistical phenomenon of bimodal or double-curved distribution in terms of their language achievement proves that our foreign language education has encountered some difficulties. How come the burgeoning language schools established in the past decade do not highly upgrade the English proficiency of our learners? How come so much money we have invested in language learning facilities and so much effort we have put to language reform just produce such frustrating results?

Without the colonial history background like Hong Kong, India, Singapore, and the Philippines, Taiwan is by no means an ESL (English as a second language) country. Instead, we have, at most, an EFL (English as a foreign language) environment in which most people use the first language to communicate. Therefore, it is obvious that we do not have an English-speaking environment unless you have a conversation with foreign friends or do business with foreigners. Even an English classroom is a simulated and more or less artificial English learning situation. Nevertheless, the prevalence of English use can not be changed overnight. Before we have a better English-speaking environment, it seems that we have to settle for instructed language learning.

There is a plethora of reasons causing the failure of language learning and pedagogy; this paper only focuses on language teaching methods. Many English teachers, especially those inexperienced ones, may wonder what the best teaching method is for my students. Probably there is no single and simple answer to this question. Since there are so many

teaching methods that English teachers can adopt in their classroom or adapt to their unique learning context, only three more recent and popular teaching methods – CLT, the Natural Approach, and Multiple Intelligences – are introduced and evaluated. Finally personal opinions and suggestions will also be offered.

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

In the mid-1960s, the view of language learning and teaching underlying Situational Language Teaching (SLT) was questioned, which contributed to the birth of CLT. While proponents of SLT emphasized the importance of the mastery in language structures, other educators such as Wilkins, Hymes, and Widdowson all concentrated on the communicative proficiency rather than linguistic competence. For example, Hymes (1971) proposed the term “communicative competence”, the central theoretical concept behind CLT, to represent the learner’s ability to perform certain communicative functions in a social context such as *requests, complaints, denials, or apologies*. In other words, effective language users with communicative competence can not only use language accurately but also use it appropriately at the right time in proper situations. They should know how to convey their intended meaning appropriately in many different kinds of speech acts. Take ending a telephone conversation for example. When you have a telephone conversation with a native speaker of English, it is all right for you end the conversation by saying goodbye abruptly and hang up. However, it is not polite to wind up a telephone conversation like that. Instead, successful L2 learners usually would give “pre-ending” signals to their friends. At the same time, effective listeners should understand both propositional meaning (i.e. literal meaning) and illocutionary meaning (i.e. intended meaning) of speaker’s utterances. Some of the “pre-ending” signals are:

*Oh, look at the time!*

*It’s getting later.*

*It’s been fun talking to you.*

*(It’s been) nice chatting with you.*

*We have to make plans to get together sometime.*

*Let’s do lunch sometime.*

(Examples extracted from *NTC’s Dictionary of Everyday American English Expressions*, 1994, p.36)

In terms of language theory, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed four dimensions of communicative competence, which later were widely accepted as a major theoretical framework of CLT. They are *grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence*.

(1) *Grammatical competence* refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and has to

do with knowledge of the core components of the grammar: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

- (2) *Sociolinguistic competence* refers to an understanding of a variety of social contexts and the ability to choose an appropriate style and register of language such as informal or formal styles, technical forms, simplified discourses, slang, or jargon.
- (3) *Discourse competence* refers to the comprehension of intended meanings of a discourse or text and also the production of a variety of syntactic structures to convey a particular intent.
- (4) *Strategic competence* refers to strategies that interlocutors adopt to initiate, terminate, maintain, or redirect communication.

Even though the original notion of CLT has been modified many times, some of the core characteristics of CLT are still observed. For instance, learners' communicative needs are still the focus of CLT and the primary function of language is efficient and suitable interaction, to name just a few. On the contrary, few learning theories of CLT have been touched on. Some significant learning theories of CLT include:

- (1) Meaningful tasks can promote language learning.
- (2) Learning activities should engage in tasks that can elicit meaningful and real language use from learners.
- (3) Interaction facilitates cooperation among learners. Information-gap activities give students a great opportunity to practice such communicative processes as negotiation of meaning or information sharing.
- (4) The use of authentic and task-based materials can promote communicative language use.

(Larsen-Freeman, 2000, chap. 9; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, chap. 14)

### **The Natural Approach**

Although the original concept of the Natural Approach stemmed from Tracy Terrell's experiences teaching Spanish classes, it was Stephen Krashen who has made the Natural Approach internationally famous as well as heatedly debated. To begin with, Krashen states that distinction should be made between learning and acquisition in *second language acquisition* (SLA), which is similar to Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. For Krashen, conscious learning process is the memorization of explicit grammar rules and linguistic forms, and subconscious acquisition process involves the internalization of the language's structure based on the comprehensible input that the acquirer receives in a low anxiety environment. In terms of language theory, on the one hand, the Natural Approach is similar to other communicative approaches which focus on teaching communicative ability. On the other hand, the Natural Approach advocates the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, especially at the beginning level of language learning when the learner, or perhaps more specifically the acquirer, does not feel ready to talk. In fact,

one important claim of the Input Hypothesis is that people acquire language best if they are given input that is slightly higher than their current level of competence. For example, if an acquirer’s level of competence is at stage  $i$ , the input he/she understands should contain  $i + 1$ . Another argument of the Input Hypothesis is that speaking should not and can not be taught directly in the classroom. Instead, the acquirer’s speech ability will “emerge” itself once he/she has built up enough comprehensible input ( $i + 1$ ) (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, chap. 15; Brown, p.278). When it comes to teaching methods and techniques, the Natural Approach does not have its own methods; rather, it borrows from other methods such as TPR, Direct Method, and CLT, and then modifies them to meet its requirements. That’s why Krashen and Terrell viewed their Natural Approach as a “reinstitution of the principles and techniques of earlier methods rather than as original” (Ellis, 1997, p.27).

Krashen did not really give certain learning and teaching activities for us to follow. Rather, he presented five major hypotheses which gave us a hotly disputed rationale behind SLA but not clear procedures or techniques. For example, The Natural Approach focuses on the importance of listening comprehension as the basis for language acquisition (*The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis*). It also stresses that self-confident learners with high motivation are successful learners and that teachers should create a learning environment which promotes self-confidence (*The Affective Filter Hypothesis*).

### **Multiple Intelligences**

The theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) is based on the work of Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education – *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983). Coincidentally, Howard Gardner published his book in the same year as Krashen and Terrell published their book *The Natural Approach*. However, the Multiple Intelligences Model has been originally proposed in general education and then has recently been applied to language education. Therefore, it is predictable that MI theory lack a concrete view of how MI theory can relate to any existing language teaching and learning theories. While traditional IQ tests measure only logic and language, Gardner advocates eight native “intelligences” – linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. There is no syllabus with respect to MI-based language teaching. The major concept underlying the learner-based, philosophical MI is that every learner should be treated as a “whole person” and has his/her individual learning styles which should be highly respected and fully developed.

In its traditional definition, intelligence may not directly contribute to one’s success as a second language learner. People with different ranges of IQs have proven to be successful in acquiring a second language. Learners with some other outstanding intelligences may directly or indirectly improve some components of language learning. For example, Brown (2000) stated that people with musical intelligence could accelerate their perception and production

of intonation patterns while learners of bodily-kinesthetic types might promote the learning of the phonology of a language and the second culture learners with spatial intelligence, especially those with a sense of direction, might help them adapt to a new environment comfortably (p. 101-102).

In 1991, Lazear proposed (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) a basic four-stage sequence as an alternative to a typical syllabus design that other teaching methods use. These four stages serve as a teaching guideline and different variants of procedure have been applied to foreign or second language instruction. The four-stage sequence and their procedures are similar to the following model (adapted from Hall Halley, 2004):

- (1) Stage 1: *Awaken the intelligence*. Lesson begins with a riddle or brainteaser. The students work collaboratively to solve the riddles.<sup>2</sup>
- (2) Stage 2: *Amplify the intelligence*. Students practice describing commonly known objects and define the properties of these objects they choose.
- (3) Stage 3: *Teach with/for the intelligence*. Through worksheets, small-group projects, and discussion, the intelligence is linked to the class.<sup>3</sup>
- (4) Stage 4: *Transfer of the intelligence*. Help students reflect on their learning experiences of the previous three stages and related the lesson content to their lives outside the classroom.

### **Problems of CLT in Taiwan**

It seems that CLT has become a “mainstream” English teaching methodology here in Taiwan in the past 10 years. A lot of parents send their children to English cram schools that focus on conversation and listening. However, after learning happily in cram schools for a couple of years, most students still can not speak English fluently, not to mention meeting the basic criteria of communicative competence – to use language appropriately at the right time in proper situations. While we have a better English learning environment in Taiwan – more language chain schools, more native English teachers, and widely used “mainstream” CLT approach, why do we obtain negative, frustrating result? There is probably no simple answer to this complicated question. Some possible explanations include:

- (1) Meaningful and effective communication can not take place without the presence of structure and grammar. However, most CLT practitioners “overcorrect” problems of more “traditional” methodology such as Grammar-Translation. In a word, CLT should not be treated as an approach that neglects grammar (Zhang, 2004).
- (2) In an EFL environment, we do not have enough authentic social contexts for students to practice their English skills, especially oral communication. Classroom settings, no matter how you change, are still an artificial situation in which spontaneous and real interaction for social and vocational purposes can hardly take place.
- (3) When CLT puts more emphasis on communicative proficiency than linguistic

competence, learners may ignore the importance of English vocabulary and lexical collocation associated to words they have learned. An English learner does not have to memorize a lot of English words and their usage to perform basic communicative function. However, while ample English words do not necessarily guarantee successful interactional communication, deficiency in English words is likely doomed to communication breakdown, especially when you are going to convey abstract concepts or profound thoughts.

### **Criticism of the Natural Approach**

One of the fierce controversies about the Natural Approach was its “silent period” and “delayed production” (Brown, 2000, p.108). The notion of “silent period” and “delayed production” was pushed too far. In 1984, Gregg, probably the first one bitterly criticizing Krashen’s five hypotheses, argued against the Natural Approach:

We have seen that each of Krashen’s five hypotheses is marked by serious flaws: undefined or ill-defined terms, unmotivated constructs, lack of empirical content and thus of falsifiability, lack of explanatory power. His second language acquisition theory is not a coherent theory; it is indeed incoherent to the point that it seems inappropriate to apply the word ‘theory’ to it. (p.94)

White (1987) gave a milder and more constructive criticism of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis when she mentioned that we should pay more attention to the interactions between learner and input instead of abandoning the hypothesis. While Krashen claimed that simplified discourses such as caretaker speech in L1 acquisition or foreign-talk and teacher-talk in L2 acquisition could be used as ideal input for  $i + 1$ , Newport, Gleitman, and Gleitman’s study (as cited in White, 1987) suggested that ‘rough-tuning’ speech delivered by mothers often fail to provide beneficial input containing structures just beyond L1 learner’s current linguistic level (p. 101). Deliberate use of simple sentences by English teachers is likely to deprive L2 learners of crucial input and hence leads to severe learning difficulties.

A serious theoretical criticism that Brown (2000) pointed out is that Krashen ignored any possible interface between learned grammar rules and acquired language. In other words, it is possible that the explicit grammatical rules that students learn could play a role more than simply monitor output; they may also be capable of helping the learner understand the input.

There are important similarities between the process of learning a first and a second language. However, there are also striking differences between first- and second-language acquisition that limit the effects of input and interaction on L2 learning, particularly for adult learners. In other words, it’s a misconception that mere exposure to the target language and

adequate interaction with native English speakers will result in English language acquisition. In addition to exposure and interaction, older students who need to negotiate abstract concepts require conscious attention to the grammatical, morphological, and phonological aspects of the English language (Harper & de Jong, 2004).

### **Controversy about Multiple Intelligences (MI)**

Gardner bases his theory on (a) his interpretation of studies of people who have had brain damage and studying their relative ability or inability to learn, (b) the belief that all humans are equally intelligent. However, people with common sense know that it is optimistically naive to believe that all humans are equally intelligent. In fact, the truth is that we are all differently intelligent. In Gardner's system, people who are not interested in nature have zero natural intelligence; people who are deaf have zero musical intelligence, etc. Nevertheless, the fact that some people are not interested in certain intelligence is not equal to zero intelligence of that quality.

In essence, MI provides a theoretical foundation for an integrated, multidimensional style of education. The reality that MI has been applied to many different types of classrooms in USA and also gradually in Taiwan is beneficial to the sound development of our kids physically, mentally, and interpersonally. For instance, more and more kindergartens and elementary schools in Taiwan have set up various self-access learning corners for children to explore their potentials. Nevertheless, the link between MI rationale and practical instruction in the language classroom is still open to debate. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) reminded us that at this moment, language teachers who wish to honor the diversity of intelligences among their students should learn how to explore the other intelligences of his/her students and help them reach their full potential, but also should not forget that their purpose is to teach language (p.172).

### **Conclusions**

CLT is absolutely not a magic panacea and not the only key to an EFL environment like Taiwan. Nevertheless, we should also be careful whether we can come up with a better solution to current problems when we present our argument against other teaching methods. Bax (2003) argued that the dominance of CLT has led to the neglect of one crucial aspect of language pedagogy – the context in which that pedagogy takes place. However, while it is true that most teacher training courses do not consider contextual varieties of their trainees who may come from many different countries, the criticism should be carefully drawn. For instance, Bax further pointed that “any training course should make it a priority to teach not only methodology but also a heightened awareness of contextual factors, and an ability to deal with them” (p. 283). Then, another question arises. How can a teacher trainer fully understand contextual factors of so many different cultures? Bax also contended that another

negative influence CLT has exerted is that coursebooks and CLT methodology books produced for the ‘global market’ imply that CLT will work anywhere if teachers just follow what those teaching materials. Again, in terms of feasibility, how many publishers can greatly modify their books for all the different countries where books are sold?

English professionals should be encouraged to adopt an eclectic approach and draw on various methodological options to meet the demands of their specific teaching situations (Hu, 2005). All the teaching approaches contain certain valuable insights. Grasp the essence of various teaching principles and identify contextual diversity of our teaching environment. Then, perhaps we can make methodological choices and pedagogical decisions to meet our students’ needs. Too much emphasis has been placed on the communicative goals of English learning in the past few years here in Taiwan. However, for some complicated reasons, we cultivated a great number of English learners who can say nothing but “How are you?” While there is no definitive solution to narrow the gap between English language teaching/learning and linguistic performance, we could try to adhere to eclecticism in language pedagogy. As Prabhu (1990) pointed out, the same context should use a number of different methods, or perhaps parts of different methods to meet individual needs (p.167).

### Notes:

1. The whole story of this report can be accessed at [http://bbs.taiwantp.net/cgi/TWforum.pl?board\\_id=2&type=show\\_post&post=1135](http://bbs.taiwantp.net/cgi/TWforum.pl?board_id=2&type=show_post&post=1135)
2. At this stage, Hall Haley did not really use “multisensory experiences” such as touching, smelling, tasting, or seeing to trigger learners’ latent intelligence. A typical syllabus of MI should take advantage of students’ various sensory function to “awaken” their intelligence.
3. A detailed and clear direction or at least some practical skills will be more helpful to inexperienced teachers who use MI first time in their class.

### References:

- Bax, S. (2003). The end of CLT: A context approach to language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 57, 278-287.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. (4th ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Canale, M., & M. Swain. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1-47.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *SLA Research and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gregg, K. (1984). Krashen’s monitor and Occam’s razor. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 79-100.
- Hall Haley, M. (2004). Learner-centered instruction and the theory of multiple intelligences with second language learners. *Teachers College Record*, 106, 163-180.
- Harper, C., & de Jong, E. (2004). Misconceptions about teaching English-language learners.

*Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48, 152-162.

Hu, G. (2005). 'CLT is best for China' – an untenable absolutist claim. *ELT Journal*, 59, 65-68.

Hymes, D. (1971). Competence and performance in linguistic theory. In R. Huxley & E. Ingram (Eds.), *Language acquisition: Models and methods*. London: Academic Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*NTC's dictionary of everyday American English expressions*. (1994). Chicago: NTC Publishing Group.

Prabhu, N. S. (1990). There is no best method – why? *TESOL Quarterly*, 24(2), 161-176.

Richards, J., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

White, L. (1987). Against comprehensible input: The input hypothesis and the development of second language competence. *Applied Linguistics*, 8, 95-110.

Zhang, L. (2004). CLT in China: Frustrations, misconceptions, and clarification. *Hwa Kang Journal of TEFL*, 10, 101-114. Retrieved October 15, 2005, from <http://www.hkjtefl.org/2004-Zhang-CLT.html>