



Grounded Theory Approach to Beginning Teachers' Perspectives of Communicative Language Teaching Practice

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has become the prevailing language teaching methodology across the world. However, beginning language teachers' application of CLT in foreign language teaching has yet to be explored in past research. This paper reports the use of CLT from the perspective of beginning Mandarin teachers. A grounded theory approach is employed as research methodology. Data were collected from interviews with eight beginning Mandarin teachers. Major findings suggest a three-dimensional explication for beginning teachers' practice of CLT in teaching Mandarin as a foreign language. The epistemic dimension indicates the beginning Mandarin teachers' concepts of CLT; the perceptual dimension reveals the teachers' concerns about CLT as being opposed to their preferences, teaching objectives and surroundings; and the situational dimension explicates the teachers' adaptation of CLT in their particular teaching situations. It argues that the integral, emergent process of the three dimensions demonstrates the process underlying beginning teachers' application of CLT theory to practice.

1 Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that beginning teachers may encounter considerable challenges in their professional development. Johnson (2006) suggested that the most difficult challenge for beginning teachers is how to use educational theories in their teaching practice. This article explores the challenge faced by the beginning language teachers, who have just started their teaching career for no more than two years, in terms of using the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in teaching Chinese as a foreign language in Australian schools.

This paper argues that the use of CLT involves the teachers' perspectives in a process of understanding, perceiving, and situating CLT. In other words, from theory to practice, beginning Mandarin teachers' interpretations about the use of CLT emerge in these three dimensions: 'Understanding CLT' reflects the teachers' perspectives of the language approach in the epistemic dimension; 'perceiving CLT' indicates their perspectives in the perceptual dimension; 'situating CLT' reveals their perspectives in the situational dimension. These three dimensions do not function separately in shaping teachers' use of CLT. Rather, they are working dynamically to shape teachers' CLT practice. Hence, the article reports a grounded theory approach to the development of a theoretical framework to understand beginning Mandarin teachers' use of CLT, and suggests

employing the framework in a wider context where the theory-practice gap of a particular field could be understood.

2 Literature review

CLT is a language approach that views language as a tool for the maintenance of social relations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Hence, CLT is highly dependent on the target language context by situating the teaching and learning process in authentic language exchanges. The interactive view of the nature of language fits with the learners' communicative needs, and the approach has gradually become the dominant model of language teaching methodologies (Butler, 2011; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1997). For example, educators and governments actively increase the number of English speakers in East Asia by promoting CLT in language policies and syllabuses (Littlewood, 2006). Yet, even though second language (L2) teachers are encouraged to use CLT in their language classrooms, the majority of them seem to have failed to deliver genuinely communicative instruction (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Li, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). The outcome in the foreign language teaching context is also not promising. Taking English as an example, the efficacy of using CLT in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) remains a controversial topic (Anderson, 1993; Cheng & Goswami, 2011; Cooke, 1986; Harvey, 1985; Li, 1998; Maley, 1984; Penner, 1995; Sampson, 1984).

2.1 *The different versions of CLT*

One significant factor that impacted the implementation of CLT is related to the variable interpretation of CLT (Butler, 2011; Cheng & Goswami, 2011). Since the introduction of CLT in the late 1970s, there have been different versions of the communicative approach in second and foreign language teaching. "The main difference is whether one's conceptualization of CLT includes attention to language form." (Spada, 2007, p. 273)

Here, the approach of CLT refers to a theory of the nature of language and a theory of the nature of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Spada (2007), there are different explanations of CLT at the theoretical level. She points out that British applied linguists share similar ideas of CLT as an approach to second language teaching that includes both form and meaning, but there have been a number of different views in North America. In the US, Hymes' theory of 'communicative competence' lays the theoretical groundwork for CLT, which regards language as a communication tool and aims to develop "an ability when to speak, when not, and ... what to talk about, with whom, when, where, and in what manner (Hymes, 1972, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 227). The concept of communicative competence is further specified in terms of four dimensions, including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Then, this holistic view about the communicative rationale offers two main insights. First, developing language within a socially meaningful context is the key feature that distinguishes CLT from other 'traditional' language teaching approaches or methods. Second, the emphasis on social interactional function in CLT does not necessarily downplay the grammatical aspect of language teaching.

In contrast, Krashen (1984) addresses the key role of meaningful communication in language acquisition, which has been highly influential in shaping the concept of CLT in North America since the 1980s. He argues that the process of second language learning is not much different from first language acquisition, and suggests that second language teaching should be similar to that for first language acquisition, with neither grammatical instruction nor correction when students make errors.

However, across the world, the primary influence on the development of CLT methodology has been mainly associated with the work of British applied linguists (Spada, 2007). Throughout their work (e.g. Littlewood, 1981; Widdowson, 1979), they build the fundamental idea that meaning and form are closely linked and that both of them need to be addressed in second language

learning. Littlewood (2006) indicates that there are various versions of CLT, which take different routes to achieve the goal of communicative language learning – to develop learners’ communicative competence. To provide specific guidelines and procedures for the delivery of a communicative methodology, he categorises five types of language activities along a continuum which range from non-communicative learning to authentic communication activities (See Table 1). An analysis of his categories shows that Littlewood emphasises ‘authentic communication’ as the key content of CLT. In contrast, Widdowson (1998) argues against using authentic language in the classroom. He claims that it is impossible to use authentic language in the classroom, since the “classroom cannot provide the contextual conditions for it to be authenticated by the learners” (p. 711).

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1. At the most form-focused end of the continuum is NON-COMMUNICATIVE LEARNING, which includes, for example, grammar exercises, substitution drills and pronunciation drills.
 2. We then move to PRE-COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICE, in which the focus is still primarily on language but also oriented towards meaning. An example of this is the familiar ‘question-and-answer’ practice, in which the teacher asks questions to which everyone knows the answer.
 3. With the third category, COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICE, we come to activities in which learners still work with a predictable range of language but use it to convey information. These include, for example, activities in which learners use recently taught language as a basis for information exchange or to conduct a survey amongst their classmates.
 4. In the fourth category, STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION, the main focus moves to the communication of meanings, but the teacher structures the situation to ensure that learners can cope with it with their existing language resources, including perhaps what they have recently used in more form-focused work. This category includes more complex information-exchange activities or structured role-playing tasks.
 5. Finally, at the most meaning-oriented end of the continuum, AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION comprises activities in which there is the strongest focus on the communication of messages and the language forms are correspondingly unpredictable. Examples are discussion, problem-solving, content-based tasks and larger-scale projects.
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Source: Adapted from Littlewood (2006, p. 247)

Table 1: Five types of language activities

2.2 Issues in beginning teachers’ professional development

Although there are different interpretations of CLT at the theoretical level, it is believed that teachers’ use of CLT in their classroom teaching is not merely determined by their knowledge of CLT learned from teacher education courses. Rather, it is a dynamic and complex process in which their perspectives of practice could be shaped by both professional knowledge and experiences in practice (Littlewood, 2007). For example, the teacher may encounter tensions in class. Tensions in the form of discomfort or confusion could stem from “divergences among different forces or elements in the teacher’s understanding of the school context, the subject matter, or the students” (Freeman, 1993, p. 488). In a study about beginning teachers’ struggles in teaching (Romano, 2008), four major areas are identified that concern beginning teachers most. The sources of these struggles include classroom management, external policy, personal issues, and content and pedagogy. Classroom management refers to the issues of student behaviour and the tensions of applying appropriate techniques to motivate students’ learning and encourage their participation in the teaching-learning process. External policy involves external factors such as the syllabus content, over which teachers feel they may have no control. Personal issues relate to teachers’ concerns and emotions, such as the feeling of being secure in their surroundings. Content and pedagogy refer to the tensions emerging from the mastery of a particular content area and teaching strategies. These sources of struggles can be major factors affecting beginning teachers’ CLT practice in their classroom teaching, which will be explored by this study.

3 Research methodology notes

This study employs the constructivist grounded theory (also termed “contemporary grounded theory”) approach to study beginning teachers’ perspectives of CLT in the Mandarin teaching context. Since teachers’ perspectives of CLT are highly personal such that the uniqueness and divisiveness of these perspectives cannot be simply grasped by predefined conceptual frameworks, the grounded theory approach is feasible for this research enquiry. Like the classical grounded theory that emphasises the generation of theory from empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), contemporary grounded theory provides a way of constructing sociological reality by means of eliciting and organising analytical and theoretical categories from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory offers a flexible research method for this study, in which the data collection and analysis processes proceed simultaneously and uses emergent categories to shape subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 1990).

The participants of this study were eight beginning Chinese language teachers. Two were qualified classroom teachers and six were volunteer teachers. All the teachers had taught Mandarin as a foreign language in the Western Sydney region for less than two years. Pseudonyms were used for all research participants. Regarding their education background, the qualified teachers hold Masters degrees in teaching and have completed a teacher education course in Australia. The course contained the content of modern language teaching methodologies, which included the CLT approach. As for the volunteer teachers, all of them had attended the language methodology training program provided by the Department of Education and Training of New South Wales. The weekly-based, three-month training program included topics such as the background of language approaches, the communicative language teaching approach, practical classroom teaching strategies, Mandarin language teaching, the NSW quality teaching framework, and school observations.

Interview was selected as the key method to collect data for the study, because semi-structured interviews with well-planned and open-ended questions fit the grounded theory approach well. The open-ended and non-judgmental questions in semi-structured interviews can encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge which are essential to theory generation (Charmaz, 2006). The list of interview questions is provided in Appendix 1.

The design of interview questions was informed by Scheele and Groeben’s (1988, cited in Flick, 2009) elaboration of interview questions along with relevant literature about the CLT approach. Three types of questions are proposed by Scheele and Groeben, and they are open questions, theory-driven, hypotheses-directed questions, and confrontational questions. Each type of question served a different purpose for the study. The open questions brought out things like teaching objectives, the basis of CLT knowledge, and perceptions of CLT that the beginning teachers may have immediately at hand. These questions included the following: “What is your general goal and personal belief in teaching Mandarin?”; “What is your understanding about this teaching methodology (CLT)?”; and “How do you think of the CLT approach or teaching foreign language in a communicative way?”. The theory-driven or hypotheses-directed questions were largely based on the literature on CLT practice and the researchers’ assumptions from emergent evidence. Examples of such Questions were: “What activities do you usually do with your students?”; “How do you think of the teaching methodology that can be used in Mandarin class?”; and “How do you think of the CLT approach that can facilitate or constrain your engagement with students?”. The third type, confrontational questions, enabled the researchers to check and reconfirm previous statements the participants had made. These questions were usually unstructured and ad-hoc and may emerge when the participants made unclear points or when the researchers needed more specific information.

The first author of the article (Researcher 1) conducted face-to-face interviews with all participants. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewee was asked to choose their preferred language for the interview. Five interviews were conducted in English, but the other three interviews were conducted in Chinese. Each interview lasted forty to sixty minutes. All the interviews were recorded using the voice memo function on the iPhone after obtaining the participants’ permission. After each interview, Researcher 1 transcribed the recording and translated the Chinese transcript

into English. To ensure accuracy and reliability, all the transcripts were checked by the second author of the article (Researcher 2) and then sent to each participant to check and approve. The two researchers conducted the data analysis together.

Constant comparative process was used throughout the analysis of the interview data. The comparative method allows the researchers “1) to compare data with data from the beginning of the research, not after all the data are collected, 2) to compare data with emerging categories, and 3) to demonstrate relationships between concepts and categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 23). The analysis of the interviews started with the coding process, which involved fracturing and conceptualising data into analytical codes. Table 2 outlines the main codes generated from the interviews.

Main codes	Participants
Regarding CLT as colloquial instructions;	All interviewees
CLT means creating target language environment;	All interviewees
CLT means using fun activities;	Michelle, Jess, Kristy
Lack of CLT strategies;	Cindy, Jess, Tracy, Kristy
Past learning experience;	Mike, Kristy, Tracy
Meeting syllabus requirement;	Jonny, Tracy
Recognising the importance of target language environment;	Kristy, Tracy, Jess
Aiming for teaching grammar;	Jess, Michelle, Jonny
Aiming for teaching culture;	Mike, Jess, Kristy, Catherine, Jonny, Tracy
Aiming for teaching Chinese characters;	Mike, Jess, Jonny, Kristy, Catherine
Aiming for developing student interests;	Jess, Kristy, Mike, Catherine, Tracy
Noticing student resistance;	Michelle, Catherine, Jonny, Kristy, Cindy, Jess, Tracy
Perceiving Chinese is challenging;	Jonny, Tracy, Michelle, Catherine
Perceiving CLT challenges students;	Tracy, Catherine, Cindy, Jess, Mike
Striving for instructional opportunities;	Jonny, Michelle, Mike
Developing interesting language activities;	Michelle, Mike, Jess, Catherine, Kristy, Tracy
teaching cultural activities;	Michelle, Tracy, Kristy, Catherine
Concerning learning habits;	Mike, Cindy, Jonny
Simplifying learning content;	Michelle, Mike, Jess, Catherine
Making clear instruction;	Tracy, Cindy, Kristy, Jess, Catherine
Changing teaching objectives;	Catherine, Mike, Tracy
Lowering expectations;	Jonny, Michelle, Mike, Jess
Noticing problems in promoting learning;	Jonny, Michelle, Jess
Using traditional teaching methods	Tracy, Jonny, Kristy, Cindy

Table 2: Main codes of the interviews

Codes that are similar are labelled by the researchers with a tentative theme denoting the common features in these codes. This step of the coding process was selective coding or focused coding, in which the researchers selected the most salient code from those initial codes or created one that could best summarise those codes as a theme (Charmaz, 2006). A theme is more conceptual than codes as it “brings meaning and identity to a recurrent [patterned] experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (De Santis & Ugarriza, 2000, cited in Saldaña, 2009, p. 139). Both the frequency of an initial code or its significance may generate a theme. Table 3 illustrates the key themes of the study which were generated either at a manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at a latent level (underlying the phenomenon) (Saldaña, 2009).

Key Themes	Main codes	Participants
Understanding CLT as colloquial instructions	CLT means communicating in Chinese;	All interviewees
	CLT means creating target language environment;	All interviewees
	CLT means using fun activities;	Michelle, Jess, Kristy
Insufficient knowledge in CLT practice	Lack of CLT strategies;	Cindy, Jess, Tracy, Kristy
Favouring CLT	Past learning experience; Meeting syllabus requirement; Recognising the importance of target language environment;	Mike, Kristy, Tracy Jonny, Tracy Kristy, Tracy, Jess
Conflicting with teaching objectives	Aiming for teaching grammar; Aiming for teaching culture;	Jess, Michelle, Jonny Mike, Jess, Kristy, Catherine, Jonny, Tracy
	Aiming for teaching Chinese characters;	Mike, Jess, Jonny, Kristy, Catherine
	Aiming for developing student interests;	Jess, Kristy, Mike, Catherine, Tracy
Losing the students	Noticing student resistance;	Michelle, Catherine, Jonny, Kristy, Cindy, Jess, Tracy
	Perceiving Chinese is challenging;	Jonny, Tracy, Michelle, Catherine
	Perceiving CLT challenges students;	Tracy, Catherine, Cindy, Jess, Mike
Promoting learning;	Striving for instructional opportunities;	Jonny, Michelle, Mike
Sub-theme: Creating comfortable environment	Developing interesting language activities; teaching cultural activities;	Michelle, Mike, Jess, Catherine, Kristy, Tracy Michelle, Tracy, Kristy, Catherine
	Concerning of learning habits;	Mike, Cindy, Jonny
Promoting learning;	Simplifying learning content;	Michelle, Mike, Jess, Catherine
	Making clear instruction;	Tracy, Cindy, Kristy, Jess, Catherine
Sub-theme: Reducing learning difficulties		
Adapting self	Changing teaching objectives; Lowering expectations;	Catherine, Mike, Tracy Jonny, Michelle, Mike, Jess
	Maintaining the status quo	
	Noticing problems in promoting learning;	Jonny, Michelle, Jess
	Using traditional teaching methods;	Tracy, Jonny, Kristy Cindy

Table 3: Key themes generated from codes

Through writing and rewriting, the researchers moved the analysis to a theoretical level where three major conceptual categories were emerging. The categories in terms of understanding CLT, perceiving CLT, and situating CLT serve as three dimensions for explicating the process of applying CLT from theory to practice. Table 4 demonstrates the generation of the key categories from the empirical data.

Key categories	Key themes	Main codes
Understanding CLT	Understanding CLT as colloquial instructions	CLT means communicating in Chinese; CLT means creating target language environment; CLT means using fun activities;
	Insufficient knowledge in CLT practice	Lack of CLT strategies;
Perceiving CLT	Favouring CLT	Past learning experience; Meeting syllabus requirement; Recognising the importance of target language environment;
	Conflicts in teaching objectives	Aiming for teaching grammar; Aiming for teaching culture; Aiming for teaching Chinese characters; Aiming for developing student interests;
	Conflicts in losing the students	Noticing student resistance; Perceiving Chinese is challenging; Perceiving CLT challenges students;
Situating CLT	Promoting learning;	Striving for instructional opportunities; Developing interesting language activities;
	Sub-theme: Creating comfortable environment	Teaching cultural activities; Concerning of learning habits;
	Promoting learning;	Simplifying learning content; Making clear instruction;
	Sub-theme: Reducing learning difficulties	
	Adapting self	Changing teaching objectives; Lowering expectations;
	Maintaining the status quo	Noticing problems in promoting learning; Using traditional teaching methods;

Table 4: Categories emerging from themes

4 Findings and discussion

This study has generated a substantive theory to depict the process of applying CLT from theory to practice. Detailed propositions in each category are presented below.

4.1 *Beginning teachers' incomprehensiveness and misconception in understanding CLT*

Understanding CLT refers to the teachers' knowledge about the CLT approach. The teachers acquired their knowledge of CLT from sources such as teacher educators, language courses, and demonstration by experienced teachers. These sources have informed their perspectives about the CLT. These perspectives include features such as incomprehensiveness and misconception about the language approach. It is found that most teachers interviewed tend to regard CLT as a language approach exclusively for teaching the colloquial aspects of a language, namely the speaking and listening skills.

I think it's [CLT] necessary in teaching, because language is a living thing, and language is not only about a written form such as literature, it's also about oral form for people to speak and communicate with. (Jess, 09/08/2010)

This finding parallels past research (Liao, 2003; Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, & Son, 2007; Thompson, 1996;). Thompson (1996) suggests that one of the major misconceptions about

CLT is regarding the approach as merely for the teaching of the spoken language. Moreover, even though some teachers have more comprehensive knowledge about CLT, few can describe a specific procedure for the CLT practice.

The first thing is language input that is the content you want to teach the students. As they learned the language content, I make them practice the learnt language by providing them with a communicative environment. The interaction in that environment could be the teacher and the students, the students themselves. The teaching objective can be achieved as long as the students are willing to speak in Mandarin under that environment. (Mike, 29/05/2010)

Thus, the CLT practice is still constrained by the lack of strategies that can be used to make CLT happen in class. For example, some beginning teachers believe that CLT not only can be used to teach the spoken but also the written language. They have created some ideas about using CLT to teach reading and writing activities. Yet, in reality the CLT practice only happens when they speak Chinese for creating the target language environment.

How can we combine the Chinese writing system with CLT practice? I suggest that, maybe we can [make] some adaptations in CLT. Usually, we use CLT in oral communication because we make the oral language as the medium, and we can make the Chinese characters as the medium language for communication as well. This is also communicative language teaching, but I think it's very hard in practice to combine Chinese characters with CLT. (Mike, 29/05/2010)

Another interrelated problem of incomprehensiveness is their misconceptions towards the language approach. Taking their perspectives about the role of fun activities, for example, some teachers regard the use of fun activities as part of CLT practice, while some do not agree with this point.

Before [when I was] learning studying in a Master's degree, I've heard of this [approach], which the teachers have told [us] some methods. And there are teachers emphasising on the audio-lingual method and having fun in the game. (Michelle, 13/08/2010)

Well, obviously I did not use that [the CLT practice] in the writing section and not the activity [language games] after writing section. I use CLT most at the beginning of the class like giving them instruction to let them settle down. I will not say stand properly or other in English, I will say it in Chinese like say “把你的包放下 [put away your bag]”; “两只手放在旁 [put your hands aside]”; “站好 [stand properly]”; “同学 [hello, students]” and let them greet back and say “老 [hello, teacher]”. (Cindy, 16/05/2010)

Both perspectives have some bias about the language approach and these misinterpretations may have stemmed from the knowledge sources such as language courses, teacher educators, and experienced teachers' demonstrations. Whitley (1993) and Mangubhai et al. (2007) suggest that the teachers' use of CLT can be misguided by these language sources, as they present the knowledge of CLT in diverse ways with varied emphasis. Diverse interpretations of the CLT approach are produced “as with the tale about the five blind men who touched separate parts of an elephant and so each described something else, the word ‘communicative’ has been applied so broadly that it has come to have different meanings for different people” (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p. 69).

Based on this study, we can argue that the beginning teachers' misconception about CLT is partially caused by multiple definitions of the concept of CLT, as we have discussed in the literature review section. Moreover, since CLT was introduced as an alternative to the grammar-translation in their language methodology courses, “it was often interpreted as synonymous with the instruction with a focus on meaning” (Butler, 2011, p. 41). To promote comprehensive understanding of CLT, beginning teachers should receive sufficient training from teacher trainers in

implementing the CLT approach, which should focus not only on oral language, but also on reading, writing and the accuracy of language use.

4.2 *Identifying conflicts and tensions in perceiving CLT*

Perceiving CLT denotes the teachers' perspectives of CLT in the perceptual dimension. These involve the teachers' attitudes towards CLT and decision-making with regard to whether and how to use CLT. At first, the teachers interviewed expressed their preferences for CLT, namely 'favouring CLT.' Factors such as the teachers' past learning experience and the conformity of CLT with the syllabus have induced the teachers to favour the language approach. The teachers experienced the struggle in learning English through repetitive drills and mechanical recitation. In contrast with their learning experience, the teachers believe that CLT might be different and may offer significant changes in the learning experience. They see it a suitable language approach, as the principles of CLT emphasise language learning for communicative competence, which is also a norm of the language syllabus of NSW.

The second feature in perceiving CLT is the conflict between CLT and teaching objectives. This conflict suggests that the CLT practice could not completely fulfil the teachers' diverse teaching objectives. Based on their understanding of CLT, the teachers assume that the CLT approach can merely be used for listening and speaking instruction. However, other than teaching listening and speaking skills, the teachers are aware that they also need to teach grammar, vocabulary, and Chinese characters that are important objectives in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Yet, they suggest that CLT could not be used for the latter purposes.

Foreign language teaching is not the same as we acquire the mother tongue that you still need to teach some grammar. ... But if you want to teach a character [or] you want to introduce some cultural content I think you still need to use English to explain these to your students. (Jess, 09/08/2010)

This perception, as a result, marginalises the potential of CLT for teaching the grammatical and structural elements of the target language. In actuality, CLT is about an integrative language instruction that combines both traditional form-focused instruction and meaning-focused teaching (Celce-Murcia et al., 1997). The effects of using CLT for language teaching, however, can be less discernible than other approaches employed by the teachers.

... but in terms of reinforcing and strengthening their memory I don't think it's the approach very, in my practice, it [CLT] does not work very well. (Tracy, 22/08/2010)

This is similar to Gatbonton and Segalowitz's (2005) findings that ascribe the modest use of CLT to its insignificant learning effects. In contrast, more traditional and direct methods, such as grammar teaching and vocabulary instruction, can provide students with more concrete and tangible learning content. As a result, the teachers have to think of traditional approaches for fulfilling their teaching objectives. Besides the language instruction, the goal of teaching Chinese culture is also in conflict with the use of CLT. The teachers interviewed believe that learning a foreign language should not be limited to the language itself, while the non-language content such as cultural instruction also matters.

It's important to teach the language but it's also important to teach the culture and to have them exposed to a foreign culture, and both needs to be done, hand in hand at certain level. We do what we can do, and we do according to the syllabus we teach. (Jonny, 22/06/2010)

Similarly, Sun and Cheng (2002) suggest that there are wide ramifications in the objectives of teaching and learning a foreign language. This means the instruction needs to emphasise not only the development of language competence, but also providing students with cultural experience.

Moreover, the use of CLT can be influenced by the issue of learning resistance. The teacher believes that students usually resist learning, and the difficulty of the Chinese language further challenges their learning. Under this circumstance, the tension of 'losing the students' emerges when the teacher applies CLT to teach the target language.

Once he [student] immerses in that [target language] environment, he could be lost. Once lost [in the target language environment], he will not be interested in it and will then totally give up the learning. (Catherine, 15/08/2010)

This kind of tension has been previously identified by Romano (2008) who asserts that beginning teachers often face struggles with regard to students' behaviour and their personal need to feel secure in their surroundings. The teachers perceive that the application of CLT can be more difficult when students are resisting learning and can potentially lead to the risk of losing students. Rather than the teacher transmitting information to the learners in the traditional classroom, CLT is a learner-centred language approach that requires learners to control their own learning in the communicative process (Song, 2009). However, students in practice are reluctant to use Chinese in communications. Besides this reluctance, students' destructive behaviour can further impair the use of CLT, if they do not engage in the learning of Chinese. As a result, these two forms of learner resistance have made it difficult for the teachers to implement the CLT approach. Hence, the teacher regards CLT as more appropriate, when the students are motivated and ready to learn Chinese.

4.3 Addressing the tension in situating CLT

'Situating CLT' is the third dimension in the theory-practice process. As previous research suggests, beginning teachers may have tensions in applying appropriate techniques to motivate students' learning and gain their participation in the teaching-learning process when they face the issue of students' behaviour (Romano, 2008). This circumstance also applies to the teachers in this study. When the teachers are facing the tension of 'losing the students,' they attempt to address the issue by employing various teaching strategies. As a result, three types of teaching strategies are identified, including 'promoting learning,' 'adapting self,' and 'maintaining the status quo.'

Promoting learning refers to the teachers' utilisation of teaching strategies to engage students in learning. To promote learning, the teachers have to adopt strategies, including 'creating a comfortable environment' and 'reducing learning difficulties.' Firstly, the language instruction has to be situated in a comfortable learning environment.

There are lots of activities, competition games, and guessing games. For example, I hold bunch of flash cards and I pick one and hide that and let them guess which cards do I hide, and they say "爸爸 [dad]" I say "不是 [no]" and another may guess "姐姐 [elder sister]," I say "不是 [no]." (Cindy, 16/05/2010)

The teacher strives to create a comfortable learning environment by introducing interesting activities. Then, the CLT practice has to be incorporated in this process. Yet, only a few activities are compatible with CLT instruction. The students would enjoy the interesting activities, while the language instruction and practice can be marginalised in these activities.

Secondly, the teachers need to reduce the learning difficulties by 'simplifying learning content' and 'making clear instructions.' To promote learning, the teachers simplify the learning content by teaching basic language items such as vocabulary and simple sentences. Likewise, the students can feel less stressed when they practise the target language with predetermined content.

I asked them [students] to come to the stage and practice the dialogue in pairs. But when they are practising speaking, I put the enquiry and reply on the board with 'pinyin' and 'hanzi.' (Catherine, 15/08/2010)

The simplified learning content, in this sense, can be in conflict with CLT practice, as CLT instruction emphasises meaning exchange in a natural discourse. Therefore, these teaching strategies result in difficulties in implementing the communicative teaching.

Besides simplifying learning content, the teachers attempt to give clear instructions. Clear instructions refer to traditional teaching practices such as the direct translation of the target language and explicit explanation of the grammatical rules. The teachers find that students can understand these traditional teaching strategies better than the CLT practice.

The classroom teacher sometimes will help me and she did find out what I am trying to teach [when I was using CLT to instruct language]. One time I remember very well. I teach kindergarten kids last year and the classroom teacher helps me with a very traditional approach and students suddenly get it and she smiled at me and ask me it is how you do it with young kids and I'm very shocked that sometimes the basic way is used, very traditional way, [is] more useful with young kids. (Tracy, 22/08/2010)

CLT instruction can be more difficult for students to comprehend than other approaches such as the grammar translation method. To give clear instructions, the teachers also combine CLT instruction with other more comprehensible strategies such as using body language. However, the effect of CLT practice can be impaired, since the students understand the meaning largely through the body language rather than the CLT practice.

'Adapting self' is another practical strategy for teachers to cope with the tension of losing the students. In 'adapting self,' the teachers lower their expectations with regard to students' language learning. Students are not expected to learn Chinese particularly well, and having a certain amount of basic language and Chinese cultural knowledge would be sufficient for the school students. As a result, the CLT approach cannot be fully used in practice.

Because many students will not pick up and be fluent by the time they finish at year 7 and 8 or even year 12. Even they finish Chinese at year 12 they are not extra fluent you cannot expect them to be like that, because they come from backgrounds of those totally not Chinese at all. And it's challenge language to pick up, but hopefully, from down the track they become interested in it, they are able to pick it up by themselves just like I did, so pick it up by themselves individually and they will have to make their own decisions later on. (Jonny, 22/06/2010)

The lowered expectation further results in changes in the teaching objectives. Before entering the teaching field, the teachers attempt to systematically teach the students Mandarin in terms of the four language skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, they change their teaching objectives when they find learning the language to be not the only goal in foreign language classrooms. Based on this assumption, the teachers attempt to develop students' interests through non-language instruction such as the teaching of Chinese culture.

When the strategies for promoting learning and adapting self are not effective in addressing the tension of losing the students, the teachers' alternative is to maintain the status quo. Maintaining the status quo attempts to keep the tension at a minimum level. As a result, students can be still resistant to learning Chinese, while their disengaging behaviour does not significantly disturb the teaching and learning process. The teaching practice for maintaining the status quo is largely non-CLT oriented. This approach includes some quiet activities such as writing practice and listening activities. These activities usually involve mechanical rather than communicative drills. Therefore, maintaining the status quo also marginalises the use of CLT in practice.

It's really hard for them [high school students] to do some activities like 'celebrity heads.' Students don't want to go to the front and do it. So sometimes I just replace the game with some worksheets. ... For example, I will give them a multiple-choice worksheet for practicing listening. (Kristy, 20/06/2010)

4.4 *An integral view of the substantive theory*

In general, the study grounded a substantive theory to depict a process about how the theory of CLT is used in actual practice from beginning Mandarin teachers' perspectives. As discussed, the three dimensions are positioned between the theory and practice of CLT. In the epistemic dimension, knowledge about CLT is obtained from sources such as the teacher education course. However, knowledge about CLT in the epistemic dimension is not a simple reproduction of the theory of CLT. Rather, it is the teachers' personal interpretation of the CLT practice. The personal interpretation can be either an accurate or inaccurate understanding of the original theory. However, no matter what the personal interpretation is, it becomes individual's understanding of CLT and informs the teachers' CLT practice. The perceptual dimension connects both the epistemic and situational dimensions. It consists of three propositions identified from the data. 'Favouring CLT' is the result of both the teachers' understanding of CLT and their living surroundings. From their past learning experience and the requirement of the language syllabus, the teachers reveal the preference of using CLT for Mandarin teaching, as they believe the principles of CLT provide a dynamic teaching and learning process, and fit with the language syllabus. Likewise, the teachers' sense of the conflicts between CLT and the teaching objectives is also generated from the teachers' concerns about their knowledge of CLT and situations they live in. The most significant proposition in the perceptual dimension is 'losing the students,' as it is highly relevant to the teachers' strategies identified in the situational dimension. The situational dimension is the actual practice of CLT. However, CLT practice depends on the teachers' strategies for coping with the tension of losing their students. Three types of strategies are found to address the tension. They are 'promoting learning,' 'adapting self,' and 'maintaining the status quo.' Although the three types of strategies may not directly involve CLT practice, their emergence in class determines how and to what extent CLT practice can be implemented. In sum, this substantive theory explains the beginning Mandarin teachers' use of CLT theory in their teaching practice.

5 Implications and conclusion

The substantive theory provides possible implications for language teaching in particular and teacher education in generally. First, it provides insights for beginning language teachers. By uncovering the teachers' conceptions of CLT, pre-service teachers would understand better the factors that facilitate and constrain the application of CLT. The identified caveats about CLT in the epistemic, perceptual, and situational dimensions may help beginning teachers build confidence in teaching. Moreover, since this study focused on the use of CLT in the Chinese language context, it particularly helps Chinese language teachers consider the connection between the language approach and Chinese teaching.

For language educators, the substantive theory may help them consider the teachers' concerns in teacher education courses. It may improve the pedagogical practice with regard to the introduction of the CLT approach. In regard the first dimension, 'understanding CLT' implies that language educators have to be cautious about teacher's incomprehensive and misinterpreted understanding of CLT. The teacher may regard CLT as a means for teaching spoken language. Hence, language educators may need to provide a comprehensive view of CLT for such teachers. The second dimension encourages teacher education to take note of teachers' needs. The majority of teachers are perceptually in favour of CLT. However, they may believe that the language approach may not help them to achieve their diverse teaching objectives. This can be true to a certain extent, but CLT practice can be used to accomplish some teaching objectives such as grammar instruction. Teachers' perception that CLT cannot be used for grammar instruction might be due to their misunderstanding of CLT and the lack of sufficient CLT oriented strategies. Hence, teacher educators could develop the language approach course by demonstrating the potential of CLT in meeting teachers' diverse demands. The third dimension, 'situating CLT,' primarily situates CLT instruction in a context where student resistance is the major issue. Most teachers interviewed suggest that CLT cannot effectively engage the students in learning. Instead, they have to either use CLT in the cap-

sule of fun activities or simply discard the language approach and utilise other strategies to promote learning. Concerning this issue, language educators who emphasise the CLT approach, may need to develop CLT pedagogy to help language teachers to use strategies to engage students in learning.

The substantive theory may also help to explain the issue of theory-practice gap. This gap suggests that certain theoretical knowledge cannot be completely applied in reality. Then, the three dimensions in this theory might be accountable for the theory-practice gap. The result of the gap between theory and practice could be explained because of problems found in the epistemic dimension, namely the insufficiency or misconceptions of certain theoretical knowledge. Likewise, the perceptual or situational dimension could also cause the knowledge not to be fully practised in reality. Thus, the integral three dimensions can be regarded as the driving force to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Based on the above explanation of theory-practice gap, there is potential in developing the substantive theory into a formal theory. The identified three dimensions for illuminating the process of the CLT application can also explain how people apply a theory or certain knowledge in general. The process of applying certain knowledge from theory to practice could include the three dimensions identified from the teachers' perspectives of CLT. The epistemic dimension reveals the mastery of certain knowledge. In the perceptual dimension, people make decisions about the application of certain knowledge in relation to their previous knowledge, personal preferences, objectives and particular situations. The perceptual decisions include whether, to what extent and how to apply the knowledge. The situational dimension is the actual practice of certain knowledge. This process is the realisation of people's perceptual thinking, which may involve the adaptation of the theoretical knowledge to fit with particular situations.

To conclude, this study identified some major difficulties of beginning teachers in their perceptions and understanding of CLT and grounded a substantive theory to understand beginning Mandarin teachers' conceptions of CLT. The theory consists of three dimensions identified from teachers' perspectives of CLT. The theory has provided one possible explanation to address the gap between theory and practice. Further studies in the field are needed as the sample of this study is relatively small. Meanwhile, the theory implies a general process of how people apply certain theoretical knowledge in practice. This implication requires cross-disciplinary research to develop the substantive theory into a formal theory that would be applicable in a wide range of social contexts.

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

How long have you been teaching Mandarin here?

What kind of students do you teach?

How many lessons do students have per week?

The first section of interview

Could you tell me what does your teaching practice look like? Could you describe one or two of your lessons? (I will have some questions while you are introducing your teaching)

The second section of interview

1. What is your general goal and personal belief in teaching Mandarin?
2. How do you promote your goal and belief?
3. Could you tell me when, if at all, did you first experience the Communicative Language Teaching Approach?
4. How do you think of the Communicative Language Teaching approach or teaching foreign language in a communicative way?
5. What is your understanding about this teaching methodology?
6. How do you think of the teaching methodology that can be used in Mandarin class?
7. How do you think the teaching methodology can be used in K-12 class in Australia?
8. How do you engage your students in class?
9. How do you think of the Communicative language teaching approach that can facilitate or constrain your engagement with students?
10. What did you find is most troublesome in your lesson? What makes that happen? And How do you alleviate the problem? Is that effective?
11. What aspects of Chinese or Chinese lesson do you think is challenging to students? How do you alleviate the issue?