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# Discovering Life Beyond Powerpoint



Strategies to Enhance Teaching & Learning  
in Higher Education

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**Professor Douglas Bell**

- ❖ School of Education and English ❖
- ❖ University of Nottingham Ningbo China ❖

[E-mail: douglas.bell@nottingham.edu.cn](mailto:douglas.bell@nottingham.edu.cn)

# Overview

- ❖ Why this topic?
- ❖ ‘Traditional’ approaches to teaching in HE
- ❖ The MA TESOL at UNNC- a rich experimental ground
- ❖ My move towards more interactive teaching
- ❖ Trying out an alternative input session & activity
- ❖ Some conclusions

## *Why this topic?*

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- ❖ strong personal interest in what constitutes effective pedagogy, especially in university contexts
- ❖ a growing dissatisfaction with ‘traditional’ approaches to teaching in HE
- ❖ a desire to experiment and to try out different things

# *'Traditional' approaches to teaching in HE*

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- ❖ 'the traditional conception of 'the lecture'... a didactic transmission of material that students passively receive' (Mann & Robinson, 2009)
- ❖ a 'grossly inefficient way of engaging with academic knowledge' (Laurillard, 2002)
- ❖ 'the traditional notion of teaching being 'a formal talk'... is difficult to get away from (Mann & Robinson, 2009)

# Approaches to teaching in HE

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7 different conceptions of teaching in HE:

- Imparting information
- Transmitting knowledge
- Facilitating learning
- Changing students conceptions
- Supporting student learning
- Negotiating meaning
- Encouraging knowledge creation

Quantitative in nature: teacher seen as central to the learning process. Emphasis on *instruction*.

Qualitative in nature: teacher seen as a facilitator of learning. Emphasis on *construction*.

(Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992 & 2001, cited in Carnell, 2007)

Instruction

Information Transfer



Construction

Information Creation

# The 'traditional' approach to teaching in HE

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## Teaching as information transfer:

- The teacher is pivotal
- Learners are passive recipients of knowledge
- Teaching emphasizes cognitive learning and logical thinking
- The curriculum is fixed
- Learners and teachers roles are distinct
- Critical thinking is not encouraged

(Carnell & Lodge, 2002; Chalmers & Fuller, 1996; Watkins, 2002)

**Instruction**

**Information Transfer**



Construction

Information Creation

# Teaching as Information Transfer

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## Death by Powerpoint?

‘boredom, frustration and disengagement’

(Ward, 2003)

‘Powerpoint frequently fostered a teaching environment in which tutors did not connect with their students by making eye contact or engaging in exchanges. Instead, they just talked to the screen, read out material on the screen and often presented far too much material because it was so easy to do so; the presentations became a barrier between the teacher and the student and resulted in a learning environment that was ‘so routine, so anodyne, so dull’..’

‘The most important teaching factor contributing to student boredom is the use of Powerpoint slides’

(Mann & Robinson, 2009)

# An 'alternative' approach to teaching in HE

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## Teaching as knowledge construction:

- Learners are encouraged to become individual sense-makers
- Teaching emphasizes activity and collaboration
- Learners and teachers roles share responsibility for teaching and learning
- Knowledge is co-constructed

(Carnell & Lodge, 2002; Chalmers & Fuller, 1996; Watkins, 2002)

Instruction  
Information Transfer



**Construction**  
Information Creation



## *The MA TESOL at UNNC: a rich experimental ground*

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- A full-time 1 year Masters degree
- Comprised of 6 x 20 credit modules (3 core + 3 elective) and a 60 credit final dissertation
- Mix of domestic and international students
- Largely taught face-to-face via 'traditional' lectures/seminars supported by a VLE (moodle)
- Aimed at both experienced and inexperienced teachers
- Good-sized cohort (30+ students)

# *My move towards more interactive teaching*

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## Some Key Questions I Pondered:

Could I find a way of teaching my students which would:

- Give them a **real purpose** for doing some background reading? *i.e. they would need to **immediately and actively use any knowledge** that they had gained*
- Have them actually **engaging with theoretical issues in practice**? *i.e. rather than simply passively learning about theory, they would get to **experience it first hand for themselves***
- Create **ample opportunities for interaction and peer learning**? *i.e. allow them to **learn from one another***
- Allow for some **genuine critical reflection and introspection**? *i.e. really **get them thinking about how the MA TESOL content applies to their own contexts***

# *An Alternative Input Session & Activity...*

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## **3 hour Input Session: ‘Communicative Language Teaching Applied’**

### 7 Specific Stages:

1. Get the students thinking about the topic in general
2. Give them an early theoretical model for critical evaluation
3. Give them some exercises to help link theory with practice
4. Give them a more recent theoretical model for critical evaluation
5. Have them do some critical comparing and contrasting
6. Give them a learning task which is itself highly communicative (loop input)
7. Have them reflect on the extent to which this task reflects the proposed theoretical models of CLT

## STAGE 1: Get the students thinking about the topic in general

### Some introductory questions to get you thinking...

Think about some of the different activities and techniques used in teaching English. You can consider these either from your experience as a language teacher or as a language learner.

- ❖ Are some activities more communicative than others? Give examples...
- ❖ What *makes* an activity communicative?
- ❖ Can you identify any key principles?

Be prepared to share your thoughts with the class as a whole.

**STAGE 2: Give students an early theoretical model for critical evaluation**

## Early Thoughts on CLT (Harmer, 1982, p166)

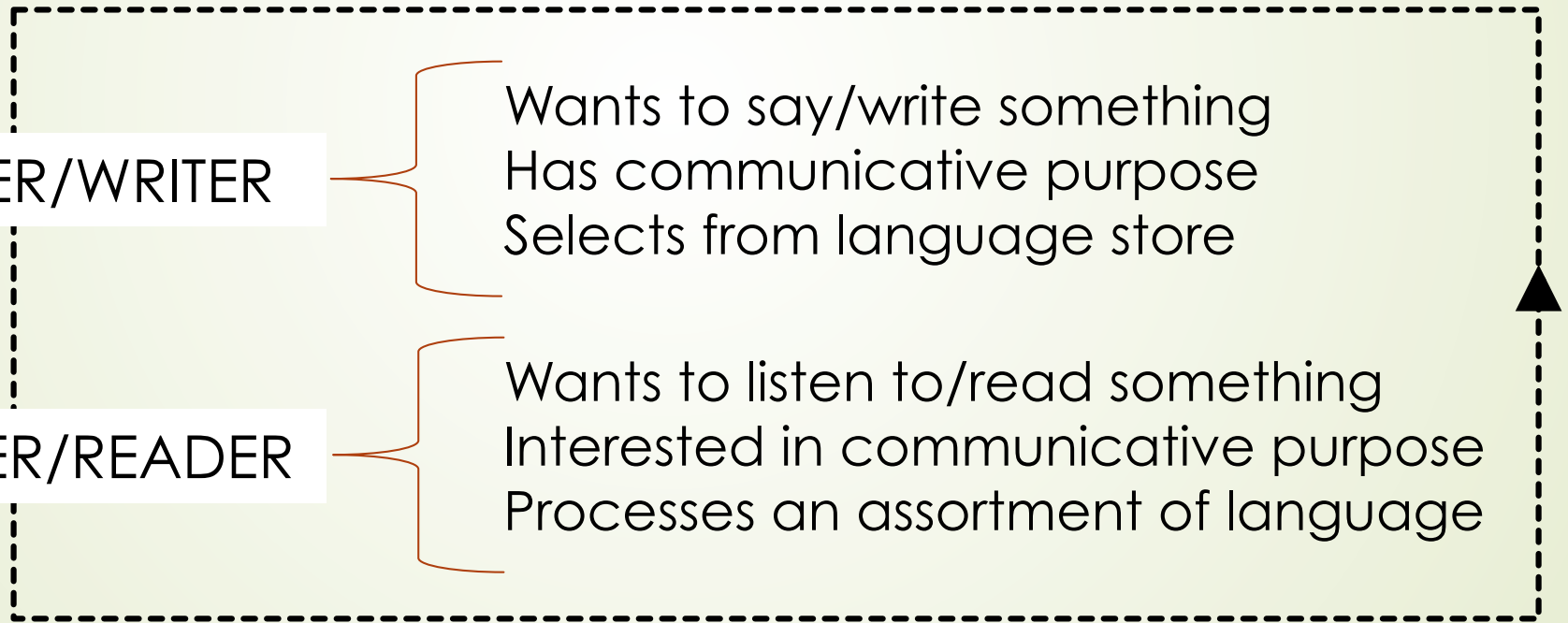
The nature of communication

SPEAKER/WRITER

Wants to say/write something  
Has communicative purpose  
Selects from language store

LISTENER/READER

Wants to listen to/read something  
Interested in communicative purpose  
Processes an assortment of language



## STAGE 2: Give students an early theoretical model for critical evaluation

### Early Thoughts on CLT (Harmer, 1982, p166)

*'Whatever the aim of any technique, only an assessment of what students are asked to do when it is being used can lead us to categorize it in terms of its communicative merits'* (Harmer, 1982, p165)

For an activity to be truly communicative:

- ❖ Students must have a **desire** to communicate
- ❖ There must be a **purpose** for communication
- ❖ Attention will be on the **content** rather than the form
- ❖ Teacher **will not intervene**
- ❖ Materials will **not control or restrict** the language

## STAGE 2: Give students an early theoretical model for critical evaluation

### Early Thoughts on CLT (Harmer, 1982)

#### *Non-Communicative Activities*

No communicative purpose  
No desire to communicate  
Form not content  
One language item  
Teacher intervention  
Materials control



#### *Communicative Activities*

A communicative purpose  
A desire to communicate  
Content not form  
Variety of language  
No Teacher intervention  
No Materials control

'The job of a syllabus or course designer is surely to work out an efficacious balance between non-communicative and communicative activities, and the many possibilities between these extremes....' (Harmer, 1982, p168)

**STAGE 3: Give students some exercises to help them link theory with practice**

Look at the various ELT activities below. Order them on a cline based on whether or not you feel they are non-communicative or communicative:

Choral Repetition

Memorizing lists of vocabulary

Role Play

Listening to a lecture

Information Gap in Pairs

Writing a letter to a pen friend

Giving instructions on how to do something

Translating sentences from one language to another

Reading a magazine

Solving A Problem in Groups

Interviewing someone

Jazz Chants

Carrying out a survey

Playing a Game



## **STAGE 4: Give students a more recent theoretical model for critical evaluation**

### **The ‘Principled Communicative Approach’:**

(Arnold, Dörnyei & Pugliese, 2015; Dörnyei, 2009)

- ❖ The input should be meaning-focused and personally engaging
- ❖ The input should contain an early and explicit focus on declarative knowledge
- ❖ There should be controlled practice activities to promote automatization
- ❖ The controlled practice activities should be as motivating and meaningful as possible
- ❖ There should be a balance struck between meaning-based activities and form-focused activities
- ❖ The input should include a focus on formulaic sequences
- ❖ Learners should receive extensive exposure to L2 input in order to cater to their implicit learning mechanisms. However, this should be scaffolded with pre-task activities
- ❖ Learners should be given lots of opportunity to participate in genuine L2 interaction

**Stage 5: Have students do some critical comparing and contrasting**

## Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...?

As Thornbury (2015, p106) has pointed out, the Principled Communicative Approach aligns itself with '*a long tradition of what might be called CLT revisionism*'.

While the principles themselves may be '*sound*', from Thornbury's perspective, the claim that this approach is new remains '*somewhat exaggerated*'.

Do you agree with Thornbury's viewpoint? What similarities and differences in what is being suggested in the principled approach can you find with ideas in ELT that have gone before?

Discuss with the person(s) sitting next to you.

## Stage 6: Give students a learning task which is itself highly communicative

You are going to take part in a debate:

**“This house believes that CLT is not suitable for use in China and should be banned”**

Two groups (the As and the Cs) **will argue to support this motion**; the remaining two groups (the Bs and the Ds) **will argue against it** i.e. that they believe CLT *is* suitable for application in Chinese contexts.

Relevant background reading and other useful information for each group can be found in folders A, B, C and D on this week's Moodle page.

Groups should work together to prepare their arguments and gather their supporting evidence. They should also decide the order in which they will speak (all group members must actively contribute to the activity and say something).

## **Stage 7: Invite students to reflect on the extent to which the task was faithful to the principles of CLT espoused in the different models**

Critically reflect on the debate that you have just taken part in.

Consider the activity from the perspective of it being an example of CLT in action:

- ❖ To what extent did the task conform to Harmer's core CLT principles from 1982?
- ❖ To what extent did the task conform to Dörnyei *et al*'s Principled Approach to CLT from 2015?
- ❖ What (if anything) worked well in the task? What were some advantages?
- ❖ What (if anything) didn't work so well in the task? What were some disadvantages?
- ❖ Could anything be modified or added to make the task work better?
- ❖ Can you see yourself using an activity like this in your own classroom? Why/Why not?

# Some Conclusions

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Did the alternative input session and activity work?

What were the benefits?

- ❖ It forced participants to read for a purpose (the pre-task articles), actively engage with relevant content and then apply it
- ❖ It forced participants to work together
- ❖ It generated lots of genuine group discussion
- ❖ It seemed to create lots of interest; it was highly motivational
- ❖ It made the links between theory and practice explicit
- ❖ It made the content more memorable; it arguably resulted in deeper learning
- ❖ It was enjoyable not only for the students, but also for the teacher

## Selected Sources

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Any

Professor Douglas Bell

[E-mail: douglas.bell@nottingham.edu.cn](mailto:douglas.bell@nottingham.edu.cn)

questions.