The perception gap in cross-cultural training: an investigation of British Council English language teaching projects in China

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Abstract

This paper examines the implementation of British Council English language teaching projects at Chinese universities. The study argues that the key to successful cross-cultural communication is an informed appreciation of the perception gap that separates donor and recipient. Cultural sensitivity and the use of a culturally appropriate methodology are of fundamental importance in educational development projects. The study argues that a local willingness to promote change is the key to sustainability of innovation. Rather than a focus on the transfer of technical skills in classrooms, the successful long-term impact of development projects depends upon professional empowerment and emancipation for the teachers.

Keywords: International development assistance; Contextualised knowledge; Expatriate specialists

1. Introduction

It has long been a challenge for educational development projects to ensure that the reforms they advocate are implemented sustainably. The challenge is increased in cross-cultural settings, where a successful outcome may involve professionals with diverse sociocultural backgrounds responding to shared targets for improved provision. Such education projects often take the form of technical co-operation agreements between local governments in developing countries and donor western organisations providing financial and professional assistance. Whilst the good intentions of western agencies to improve the quality of education in less developed countries have seldom been questioned, it has been a concern for donors and expatriate specialists that such good intentions are not always well received. This issue has been the object of some discussion in the literature on educational innovation and change (Delens, 1999; Holliday, 1992, 1994; Kennedy, 1999; Leach, 1994, 1999; Markee, 1997, 2001).

A variety of factors may influence the progression of educational development projects in a cross-cultural setting, including the political and economic context, the level of administrative...
support, individual and institutional priorities, the presence of societal and cultural differences, and differences in professional beliefs. The paper provides a detailed examination of the issues that arise from cross-cultural differences in perceptions and beliefs in English language teaching (ELT) projects. Evidence is brought to bear on the question from interview and questionnaire data gathered from British specialists and Chinese teachers working on a series of British Council projects in China that were aimed at improving the provision of ELT. An important aspect of these projects was their advocacy of communicative language teaching (CLT) techniques.

Since its Reform and Open Door policy of 1979, there has been a dramatic growth in Chinese interest in opening up to the outside world and determination to join the “global village”. Economic globalisation and China’s recent joining of the World Trade Organisation have reinforced the status of English as ‘the dominant language for international communication’ in China (Smith et al., 2000, p. 2). The aim of establishing international co-operation with western organisations, such as the US International Communication Agency, Hawaii’s East-West Centre, and the British Council, has been to promote the use of the English language and the quality of ELT.

As Maley (1995) notes, since the early 1980s Britain has been the ‘only anglophone nation to have provided continuous and consistent official support and assistance to China for the teaching of English as a foreign language’ (1995, p. 15). Sino-British co-operation in ELT was formalised in 1979 after the signing of the first Cultural Exchange Agreement between the two governments (Wickham, 1995). The ELT development projects exhibited the major characteristics of most aid-funded development projects (Leach, 1994, p. 219), that is, provision of ‘on-the-job counterpart training’ through input from expatriate specialists. Lifted almost exactly from here to put in the 2010 article....hmm...

The fundamental policy objective of the British Council ELT projects—as described by the former British Council Beijing second secretary—was to assist China’s economic development and trade by ‘introducing and establishing more effective CLT methodologies’ (Wickham, 1995, p. 5, emphasis added; British Council, 1999). Such a statement immediately begs the question of whether CLT is in fact ‘more effective’ irrespective of the educational contexts in which it is practised. Evidence presented here on the importance of cross-cultural issues and the need for sociocultural sensitivity suggests that the claimed superiority of CLT is unlikely to be robust to variations in its target teaching and learning setting. This paper argues that educational innovations need to be clearly defined, contextualised and reflected upon by both the policy makers and their employed specialists.

Although the focus of this paper is on language education, the issues that arise are likely to be of general relevance to the provision of aid and cross-cultural collaboration. Evidence is provided of significant perception gaps between the views of expatriate specialists and local teachers—differences that are likely to be important in the delivery of educational development projects. It is argued that a key to the successful implementation of such projects lies in explicitly recognising the importance of perception gaps and addressing the problem with the provision of a culturally responsive methodology. A distinctive and relevant feature of the paper is the author’s own intercultural experience, which spans Chinese and British approaches to teaching and learning. The paper begins by describing key methodological issues arising in this study of the British Council ELT projects and then provides an analysis of the nature of gaps in perception between the main groups of actors involved, British specialists and Chinese teachers. Perception gaps were found both across and within cultures. Thus significant differences in perception were found between British specialists and Chinese teachers, but perception gaps were also found within the group of British specialists. In this latter case, the study identified two separate clusters of British specialists holding contrasting views regarding language teaching and learning. A further finding is that important similarities of view, areas of common ground, as well as the differences can be identified...
in perceptions of ELT across cultures. The paper discusses the issues that arise from the existence of such perception gaps and areas of common ground in professional communication and concludes that in educational development projects that operate in cross-cultural contexts it is essential to employ a culturally appropriate methodology.

2. The study

The findings of this paper are based on analysis of case studies of British Council ELT projects aimed at implementing ELT innovations at tertiary level Chinese institutions under the supervision of British expertise. Beginning in Spring 2001, the author collected an extensive series of data in China and England from British specialists and tertiary Chinese teachers of English who were involved in these projects. The investigation employed a complementary combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. It was carried out in a sample of 24 Chinese universities that had hosted the British Council ELT projects. The main methods for data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires.

Fig. 1 illustrates the structure of qualitative data. The analysis of interview data was carried out at three levels:

- between the British specialists and the Chinese project participants—aimed at comparing the two parties’ beliefs and views on ELT;
- within the principal data source university (subsequently referred to as University A), between Chinese teachers who were involved in the project and those who were not—aimed at exploring the impact of the project on teachers’ professionalism;
- a cross-case analysis between Chinese participants from University A and from five other institutions (subsequently referred to as Other Universities)—aimed at examining the generalisability of the findings in University A to other similar settings.

The interview data were collected with the aim of developing an in-depth exploration of the respondents’ contextually constructed beliefs concerning ELT. In addition, the aim of the questionnaire was to collect evidence from the wider population on the nature of any overarching Chinese views on language teaching and learning. The questionnaire survey was applied to two groups, namely:

- the BC Chinese teachers Group—Chinese teachers of English that had been participants in British Council ELT projects, and;
- the non-BC Chinese teachers Group—Chinese teachers of English from universities that had not been involved in ELT projects with assistance from western expertise.

The non-BC group provides a comparison for the BC group and represents the vast majority of Chinese teachers of English who have little access to western expertise in ELT. A comparison
between the two groups’ beliefs and perceptions is expected to show the extent to which the British Council ELT projects had influenced participant teachers’ views on ELT. High response rates were obtained for the samples, as shown by Table 1, which set out a summary of survey samples and response rates.

As noted above, a special characteristic of this study was the author’s own inter-cultural role. The author possesses both English and Chinese languages. In addition, her teaching experiences in a British Council ELT project and 4 years of research training in a British university enabled her to present herself as an inter-cultural researcher with a degree of sharing of language and culture as well as professional experience with both British and Chinese respondents. The author’s awareness of her inter-cultural role in this study can be argued to accord well with the theme and context of this inquiry which is itself cross-cultural in nature. The author sought to use such awareness of cultural sensitivity and reflexivity to develop trust and establish rapport with the respondents in interviews. Thus, the meaning of cross-cultural awareness in educational development projects, the focus of this study, was consolidated in the process of the investigation.

The next section presents the results of the case studies, examining the nature of perception gaps and areas of common ground in beliefs observed in the British Council ELT projects. Whilst some preliminary discussion of the projects has been set out in summary form in Gu (2003), this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and an extended discussion of the problems of cross-cultural understanding that threaten successful delivery of development projects.

3. Findings—perception gaps and areas of common ground in cross-cultural training

The research presented here first examines perception gaps across cultures, between British specialists and Chinese teachers. It then goes on to describe and discuss an important difference in perceptions between two groups that were identified within the group of British specialists, and suggests some implications that may be indicated for improving cross-cultural supervision.

3.1. Perception gaps across cultures

The overall finding on the question of the nature of perceptions across cultures was that there was a significant difference between views of British specialists and Chinese teachers in their views of the local teaching and learning context and its impact on ELT. In contrast there was a lack of marked difference in the two groups’ views on the nature of language and the concept of CLT. The different perceptions of the local teaching and learning context in turn revolved around two main themes—differences in language teaching traditions and differences in language teacher education. These differences are now discussed in more detail under these headings.

3.1.1. The perspective of the language teaching tradition

British specialists, in their position, generally speaking, as missionaries of CLT, were inclined to identify what they saw as a resistance in Chinese teachers towards complete acceptance of the professed benefits of their proposed methodological innovations. The quotation below from a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BC Chinese teachers group</th>
<th>Non-BC Chinese teachers group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total universities contacted</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total questionnaires distributed</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At institutional level</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At individual level</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
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British specialist explains how she understood the difficulty of changing the Chinese ELT practice.

Many [Chinese teachers] were against CLT. I think some of them think it [CLT] is western, and they think that westerners don’t understand China. And they think... students in China have been learning English for many years, and some of them have learned it very well. And so why should they change their methods? I think that is one sort of reason against it.

And another is that it is too ‘wishy washy’ because in some way it is not so formally structured. And you see in the traditional approach, the teacher knows what words the teacher has taught, knows the structures they have taught, and it is knowledge that they have passed onto their students. And I think that the teacher feels comfortable with that and then they can test their students. ... But with the communicative approach, it is skills based, and as you know it is much more difficult to test skills. (British respondent A)

To some British specialists, Chinese teachers were seen to confront their proposed initiatives with opposing concepts from a Chinese cultural context that seemed to be deeply rooted in the classroom. However, when these British specialists made comments such as: ‘because it is something we never do in real life’ (British respondent A) and ‘I never heard of intensive reading... I did not understand it at all’ (British respondent H), they may not have been aware that they could also be seen as viewing the Chinese practice from the perspective of their own cultural context.

In the following sections the term Chinese ‘participants’ is used to indicate interviewed BC Chinese teachers who had participated in the British Council ELT projects, as distinct from the BC Chinese teachers that took part in the questionnaire survey. Both the qualitative and quantitative data show Chinese teachers’ openness to CLT methodologies and a willingness to change and improve their teaching practice. Comments from the Chinese participants such as ‘I also learned a lot’ (University A: Chinese participant C) and ‘I think the communicative approach will be the trend’ (University A: Chinese participant D), show an open-minded and positive attitude to the advantages of CLT over the traditional teacher-centred language teaching. However, the Chinese participants also firmly believed that a good command of English structures was of crucial importance to Chinese learners who were learning English as a foreign, not a second language in China. They therefore tended to resist completely converting to the CLT approach advocated by the British specialists. For example,

It is necessary for foreign students to acquire linguistic knowledge and knowledge of grammar, especially for adult learners, who use deductive learning strategies compared to the inductive way of learning in children. ... For adult learning, it is necessary to acquire knowledge of grammar, a deductive way of learning, especially in a foreign language learning environment. Fluency should come after training on accuracy. Communication is the ultimate aim, through the means of vocabulary and grammar. (Other Universities: Chinese participant C)

Such an attitude echoed a finding of the questionnaire analysis that both the BC and the non-BC Chinese teachers believed that ELT should focus on the form of English. The dominant Chinese attitudes towards CLT consisted of a desire to mediate CLT to fit in with the Chinese ELT context. The following quotation exemplifies such opinions.

We should understand CLT in the context. American CLT would be different from CLT in China, as the contexts are different. ... Students are different from before, and so are their needs. ... There are too many factors that require change in teaching, the purpose of which is actually to communicate. If we understand CLT from this perspective, we may find it more practical, as there is the need. (Other Universities: Chinese participant A)

3.1.2. The perspective of language teacher education

Chinese teachers’ views on teaching and their defence of the traditional ELT approaches largely stemmed from the respect for knowledge that is a
feature of Chinese culture, greatly influenced as it is, by Confucian philosophies. This value was also reflected in their views on teacher education. The survey research showed that one impact of the British Council ELT projects was a change in the BC trained Chinese teachers’ views towards a generally anti-traditional view of teacher education. Specifically they thought that the transmission of knowledge of English was not an adequate focus for an in-service teacher-training (INSET) programme, but that such programmes should also include a teaching methodology element aimed at enabling teachers to deliver knowledge of English effectively. Almost all Chinese participants reported that involvement in the projects had strongly influenced and benefited their teaching performance. Working with British specialists had enabled them to realise that there was another way of teaching. For example,

I had a deeper, systematic and thorough understanding of ELT and gained more confidence in language teaching. ... Before the project, when I wanted to try some new ideas from reading, I did not know how to do it. ... CECL has fundamentally changed me. ... Teaching has become more interesting. Before I thought it was very dull and even thought of changing jobs. Besides, I have realised the importance of specifying course aims which make teaching more systematic. (Other Universities: Chinese participant D)

Although British specialists commented positively on Chinese teachers’ desire to develop their professional skills, the majority of the British specialists saw Chinese teachers as being insufficiently open to western methodological innovations. They did not think their Chinese trainee teachers were particularly interested in methodology because, from the Chinese viewpoint, methodology was not seen as a subject with academic status. Such a view is apparent in the following quotation.

The tradition of Chinese education, not just language teaching, but higher education in general is very sort of, ... it’s the idea that the teacher is very knowledgeable in that subject. And methodology is very much a secondary thing. The important thing is to know your subject very well, and the actual delivery of it is not given that much attention. (British respondent D)

Reflecting on the Chinese value of knowledge, some British specialists commented that Chinese teachers’ perceptions of teacher training were particularly theory-focused rather than practice-oriented.

I think the main difference was that their understanding of training was that people needed a great deal of theory, and only when they had this theory could they begin to consider practice. And I think that is rather different from the views of training we take over here, which is that theory happens with practice. They don’t happen separately. So I would say that in that sense there was a different view. (British respondent O)

Chinese teachers’ views were significantly different from the views of British specialists outlined above. As noted at the beginning of this subsection, both qualitative and quantitative data showed that Chinese project participants greatly welcomed input on teaching methodologies and understood the importance of this input to their professional teaching skills. The majority of the Chinese project participants thought of British specialists as ‘real language experts’ who had offered expertise in ELT. As Chinese teachers saw it, what British specialists were lacking were cross-cultural adaptability and an understanding of the Chinese educational context. A University A participant made the following observation.

Personally I appreciated their working attitudes. They really are language experts. And they are very faithful to their work. And they are ... very strict. I think we have learned a lot from them, at least the attitudes towards work. They are really devoting all their time to this programme, I think. I think our Chinese teachers know more about our students’ academic levels and their future
needs. Maybe this is where they [the British specialists] are lacking. They are working in their own way, and according to their own principles. Perhaps they are ... not quite sure about where our students stand academically. ... But if they knew more about our students and our educational system, then perhaps they could do a better job. (University A: Chinese participant E)

This observation is supported by the questionnaire analysis—the majority of the BC Chinese teachers did not think British specialists were experts in Chinese classrooms. Chinese participants recognised elements of cultural differences and different attitudes towards theory as contributing factors. The following quotation exemplifies such Chinese views:

I guess there was a kind of conflict between the local Chinese teachers and the Western specialists. We always need to negotiate. I’ll give you a small example, the way the British specialist and myself introduce ourselves. The British specialist asked every student to call her by her first name. ... But when I introduced myself, I said that you could not call me by my first name. That shows the cultural difference, and it affects a lot of things, not just the way you introduce yourself. ... We need this kind of mediation or negotiation for a joint venture to take place, to be implemented successfully. We need to understand each other, to know more about the cultural differences.

... I still think that we need some theory, for example, applied linguistics or second language acquisition theory, or foreign language education theory, all those things. I mean our teachers start teaching just with ... what they have learned when they were students. That does not really prepare them for the job of teaching. To be a teacher, you need to know more. So I still feel that in any kind of training, whether pre-service or in-service, we would like to have some kind of theory, guiding theory. ... We have a lot of experienced and senior teachers, and they have never had any training. But if we can have a kind of in-service training, a kind of theoretical input, that will help them to put practice back into theory. So they know what they are doing and how they are doing it. They would start asking themselves why they are teaching the way they are. And that is also practical or feasible for any training class to have theoretical input. (University A: Chinese participant H)

Thus, an alternative interpretation of the British observation could be that Chinese teachers welcome an integrated approach in teacher training that combines theoretical and practical input. Such an approach would enable them to develop a rationalised improvement of their teaching performance.

The following example was contributed by a Chinese participant from Other Universities, and demonstrates how far an educational development project can go wrong when there is a failure to establish dialogue and mutual understanding in professional communication in a cross-cultural setting.

It is hard for some people to adjust themselves to the Chinese culture. Then it is almost impossible to communicate with Chinese teachers and get to know what our Chinese teachers need and what we are thinking. ... There was a British specialist who was an expert in materials writing, but not a teacher. He had no idea of my students and my teaching. So it was a disaster to work with him as we could not accept a lot of his proposed ideas. ... The expert on material writing told us that he had the expertise in materials writing. Therefore, we had to either use his version or there would be no book. We were asked to make a choice. We did not have any choice. The project had been going on for 8 years. We needed to show a product. So in the end we had something that we were not happy with. (Other Universities: Chinese participant A)

This project eventually produced some materials that were totally unsuitable for the targeted students’ attainment level. In addition, it is worth
questioning the extent to which Chinese teachers involved in this particular project would have benefited from the input of the British expertise.

3.2. The observation of areas of common ground across cultures

The above discussion has set out evidence of significant differences between the perceptions of Chinese teachers and those of British specialists of the Chinese educational context and its impact on approaches to teaching and learning. However, although such differences are clearly established, the most interesting finding from comparison of the two groups was the existence of a substantial degree of common ground between Chinese teachers and British specialists. The two groups shared views on the Chinese tradition of language teaching and learning, on the importance of interaction in language learning, on Chinese learner strategies and on testing. Whilst it would be expected that Chinese teachers would have a more extensive knowledge of Chinese ELT culture, the British specialists also demonstrated a more knowledgeable understanding of this subject than might have been expected and both perceptions of the Chinese ELT culture had striking similarities (see Table 2).

The existence of a substantial body of shared views on ELT across the different cultures—between British specialists and Chinese teachers—offers a useful basis for constructing a more productive approach in cross-cultural educational programmes. It also provides a starting point for professionals from different cultures to establish dialogue and mutual understanding and achieve a collaborative working environment (Gu, 2003, 2004).

3.3. Perception gaps within cultures

3.3.1. Differences in beliefs between British specialists

A further important finding of the research is the existence of significant differences in beliefs within cultures, specifically in the group of British specialists. Whilst all 19 of the interviewed British specialists clearly indicated beliefs in teaching English through communication, examination of the detail of their perceptions of language teaching and learning by a keyword search revealed that there were two distinctive views within the group. Table 3 illustrates the differing beliefs and views of ELT of the British specialists’.

Analysis clearly identified a cluster of eight British specialists who strongly emphasised the importance of interaction in learning a foreign language—normative views as reflected in widely accepted theories of CLT set out in the literature.

Table 2
Chinese project participants and British specialists’ views of ELT culture in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese project participants</th>
<th>Participants from other universities</th>
<th>British specialists</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A participants</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Beliefs in knowledge</td>
<td>● Beliefs in knowledge</td>
<td>● Beliefs in knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Transmission of knowledge in teaching</td>
<td>● Transmission of knowledge in teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Teacher-centredness/students passive learning styles in class</td>
<td>● Teacher-centredness/students passive learning styles in class</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Teachers’ lack of training in methodology</td>
<td>● Teachers’ lack of training in methodology</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Teachers’ lack of understanding of ELT theory</td>
<td>● Low status of methodology—not academic</td>
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<td>● Professional isolation</td>
<td>● Professional isolation</td>
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<td>● Leaders with set ideas—admin. blocks</td>
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<td>● Low status of methodology—not academic</td>
<td>● Low status of methodology</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Professional isolation</td>
<td>● Lack of professional co-operation</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Leaders with set ideas—admin. blocks</td>
<td>● Lack of professional openness</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Administrative blocks</td>
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</table>
However, this cluster was notable for an absence of reference to the teaching and learning context in their descriptions of CLT. A contrasting cluster consisting of the remaining 11 British specialists was identified as being more concerned with the appropriateness and relevance of teaching approaches in particular contexts, and as demonstrating a stronger awareness of the need for registering the meaning of contextual needs in language teaching practice. The first cluster was therefore, labelled as the ‘Normative’ cluster and the second as the ‘Relative’ cluster. Whilst the British specialists could sometimes exhibit some ‘normative’ and some ‘relative’ features simultaneously, the two groups were nevertheless clearly distinct.

The following quotations from two British interview respondents, one taken from the ‘Normative’ cluster and one from the ‘Relative’ cluster, exemplify the views listed in Table 2 and demonstrate contrasting observations on the local teaching practice.

‘Normative’ cluster—interaction

“We had been taught Latin in a similar way, sort of grammar-translation methods. I found that in some places English was being taught like a dead language. People still are memorising vocabulary, memorising dictionaries, thinking that that would improve their English, and absolutely no concentration on communication. … So intensive reading was something that I did not understand at all.” (British respondent H)

‘Relative’ cluster—contextual needs

“When I observed a class of Intensive Reading, I discovered things which disconfirmed my prejudices, I think. I’d always assumed in the past, coming from these traditions, very strong sort of British type CLT tradition, an Intensive Reading class would not involve participation. It would have assumed the students to be in a very sort of passive mode …. What I noticed was that there was a lot of communication going on in the classroom, but it was subtle. And the teacher was very much in tune with the flow of the class.” (British respondent D)

3.3.2. The relationship between British specialists’ differences in belief and their work experiences

The existence of a significant divergence in the beliefs of British specialists on the importance of contextual factors in ELT poses the question of whether these differences in belief had influenced British specialists’ experiences in the projects. This turned out to be the case as differences in beliefs were found to relate to differences in British specialists’ emotional experiences of ELT work. The ‘Normative’ cluster specialists who had relatively rigid views on the universal applicability of teaching methods and who had relatively low faith in local Chinese teachers were found to have had less satisfying emotional experiences in comparison with the ‘Relative’ cluster specialists who were more culturally sensitive to the local teaching context.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Normative’ cluster—interaction</th>
<th>‘Relative’ cluster—contextual needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning English through interaction</td>
<td>Looking for bridge between CLT and the traditional methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying attention to conversation</td>
<td>Looking for various methods suitable for contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to practise speaking and listening</td>
<td>Teaching/operating from within a discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of communication</td>
<td>Teaching within context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot of group work, discussion, pair work</td>
<td>Adapting according to local context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing more language skills besides reading</td>
<td>Culturally appropriate methodology</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2 summarises the observed pattern of the two clusters of British specialists’ feedback on their experiences in China as teacher trainers. Among the eight people in the ‘Normative’ cluster, only one thought of the experience in China as ‘wonderful’ (one smiling face). In comparison, five out of 11 people in the ‘Relative’ cluster enjoyed their professional experiences in the British Council ELT projects (five smiling faces). There are no confused faces in the ‘Relative’ cluster, but in the ‘Normative’ cluster two persons reported some
‘emotionally demanding’ (British respondent L) time in the projects, as denoted by two confused faces. In addition, six people in the ‘Relative’ cluster regarded their experience in China as a professional investment that had led to the progression of their academic careers.

Although drawing any general inference on CLT from this small sample must be subject to caution, the apparent relation between beliefs and experiences is nevertheless striking. It is even more so when taking into account the fact that the field research of this study was undertaken after completion of the majority of the British Council ELT projects. With the advantage of some passage of time, the British specialists’ views on ELT expressed at these interviews are likely to be blended with a degree of overall reflection on their professional experiences in the projects. But even after such reflection, some British specialists retained a lower sensitivity to contextual needs in the implementation of ELT innovations. Hence, more confidence can be placed on the observed relation between beliefs and cross-cultural experiences. The subjects’ opportunity for reflection also reinforces the confidence that can be placed in the identification of the two clusters of British specialists and the observation of the relationship between their differences in belief and work experiences.

The finding of perception gaps within cultures offers interesting clues for donor organisations and expatriate specialists seeking to improve cross-cultural supervision in educational development programmes. The finding of more difficult emotional experiences of projects amongst the “Normatively” inclined British specialists highlights the potential danger of entering the arena of a different educational culture with preconceived and rigid views and beliefs. An important implication is the necessity for pre-departure trainer training, aiming at helping expatriate specialists to enhance cross-cultural awareness, minimising the potential for cross-cultural conflicts and maximising the impact of the proposed educational change.

4. What does the study show?

Amongst the wide range of factors that may influence the progression of INSET in a cross-cultural setting, the issues that attracted most comment from Chinese teachers in this study were those relating to the perception gap in professional beliefs and knowledge regarding ELT and teacher education. This perception gap, which springs from the individualised and contextualised nature of teacher knowledge, is of clear relevance to the
effectiveness of joint working of British specialists and Chinese teachers and hence to the likely success of such projects. It is therefore of key importance to explore further the structure of such individualised and contextualised knowledge, and this question is tackled in the next section.

4.1. Individualised and contextualised teacher knowledge

From a social constructivist perspective, Blum (1971) argues that

... if objective knowledge is taken to mean knowledge of a reality independent of language, or presuppositionless knowledge, or knowledge of the world which is independent of the observer’s procedures for finding and producing the knowledge, then there is no such thing as objective knowledge. (Blum, 1971, p. 129)

Blum’s argument implies that reality is socially constructed and has ‘to be continually interpreted’ (Esland, 1971, p. 75). An absolutely objective view of knowledge tends to deny the active role of human beings in the process of knowledge creation. In Esland’s words, this denial is ‘fundamentally dehumanizing’ as it ‘ignores the intentionality and expressivity of human action and the entire complex process of intersubjective negotiation of meanings’ (1971, p. 75). In the field of education, such a social constructivist perspective regards teachers as social beings and takes the view that the teacher’s ‘social world is the reality, the base from which each teacher will develop’ (Roberts, 1998, p. 45, italics in original). Discussing ELT specifically, Richards and Lockhart (1994) argue that ‘language teachers’ beliefs emerge from a complex of social and individual influences’ (cited in Roberts, 1998, p. 37) and Pennycook (1989) sets out more detail of this kind of complex influence, finding that

... teachers made a whole series of decisions about teaching based on their own educational experiences, their personalities, their particular institutional, social, cultural, and political circumstances, their understanding of their particular students’ collective and individual needs, and so on. (Pennycook, 1989)

Although the British specialists in the projects had all received their professional education and training in ELT in the same national context, i.e. the UK, their localised educational backgrounds and various professional experiences around the world would have shaped their understanding of the teaching theories set out in the literature. Some of these British specialists held more restrictive views on CLT, insisting on interaction throughout the class and ‘the learners being at the centre of the classroom’ (British respondent L), whilst others were more open-minded and willing to mediate CLT to fit in with the local educational context. The difference is evidenced in the following comments on the mission of introducing CLT in the Chinese classroom made by specialists from the normative and relative clusters.

‘Normative’ cluster—interaction

I think with the communicative approach the students become much more active in their classroom, and they are able to use the language in their listening and speaking, which is what many of them like to do. And because the communicative approach also uses (integrates) the four skills, so integrating the four skills helps them to improve their knowledge of each of the skills, and the classroom becomes more interesting. (British respondent N)

‘Relative’ cluster—contextual needs

I anyway was never completely hooked on communicative language teaching in the way that some other Brits that I know would have been. ... We can’t just sell communicative language teaching. ... We have got to take something of what is known, not just because it was known, but also I was realising increasingly as years passing in China that so many people around me spoke such great English ... products of the grammar-translation classroom. So I felt that as living proof everywhere that what had been happening must have lots of what was good about it, certainly of particular people, of particular attitudes, and of particular intelligence level. It was working. It was getting
a good grounding. So we should not be rejecting the approach. (British respondent B)

It is interesting to see that the above ‘Relative’ cluster specialist was also explicitly conscious of the existence of ‘normative’ views, thus providing a further element of evidence for the existence of these clusters.

In neither cluster would CLT merely be an abstract label for a particular teaching approach. Rather, theories of CLT would have been personalised by these ELT specialists on the basis of their educational and professional experience and subject to the influence of sociocultural factors within their work context. In Carter’s (1990) view, these specialists’ knowledge and beliefs concerning ELT were anchored in the practical circumstances in which they worked and were based on their personal understandings of classroom knowledge as well as their knowledge of students (cited in Munby et al., 2001). It has been argued that the ultimate process of personal knowledge creation is accomplished by the ‘complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation’ (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 22, italics in original) of the theoretical claims of CLT. The consequence of these processes will be that theories of CLT in the literature are integrated and reconstructed into individual specialists’ schemata or knowledge structures on language teaching and learning and will take on distinctively contextualised and individualised characteristics (Gu, 2003).

Eraut’s (1994, p. 25) answer to the problem of ‘how theory gets to influence practice’ and the problem of ‘how people use the knowledge they have already acquired’ provides a rather similar viewpoint on the construction of personal knowledge.

The key to unlocking these problems was my realization that learning knowledge and using knowledge are not separate processes but the same process. The process of using knowledge transforms that knowledge so that it is no longer the same knowledge. But people are so accustomed to using the word ‘knowledge’ to refer only to ‘book knowledge’ which is publicly available in codified form, that they have developed only limited awareness of the nature and extent of their personal knowledge. (1994, p. 25)

The important point is that as a result of the ‘learning knowledge’ and ‘using knowledge’ processes, the theoretical images of CLT held by the British specialists will no longer be the same as the images presented in theorists’ publications, but will be modified by personalised knowledge arising from practical experience. Furthermore, even the theorists’ knowledge may vary from publication to publication over time. Therefore, we would expect to find, grouped under a single umbrella ‘British Council’ concept of CLT, British specialists holding a multiplicity of differing perceptions of CLT and making differing assumptions about the application of CLT in the Chinese context. The likelihood of a wide range of perceptions is supported by the identification of the two distinct clusters of British specialists discussed above. The implication for project planners would be that it is naïve to expect the change agents employed to advocate an identical package of teaching methodologies to the local teachers in an identical way.

It is essential that both the policy makers and the change agents are aware that professional knowledge and beliefs are not only personalised, but also characterised with values embedded in a whole range of contexts ranging from classrooms and schools to the wider nation.

4.2. Building on areas of common ground

Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986) introduce the notion of the cultures of teaching to denote a set of beliefs about appropriate ways of acting while engaged in teaching as well as the knowledge that enables teachers to do their work. They advance a widely accepted view that ‘the cultures of teaching are shaped by the contexts of teaching’ (1986, p. 515). In the British Council projects, because the British specialists and Chinese teachers came from different teaching cultures, their perceptions of appropriate teaching content and classroom behaviour were also likely to differ. However, analysis of the interview data identified the existence of a substantial body of shared views between the British and the Chinese on some
important issues in ELT in China. Such shared views provide common ground on which the two groups may, despite their different sociocultural backgrounds, work together towards a shared goal. Failure to acknowledge the existence of such common ground will lead to an over emphasis on differences and difficulties and may create unnecessary barriers to the implementation of change. Also, acknowledging shared views is likely to allow actors to see their own standpoints more clearly, and perceive differences at a deeper level. According to Holliday (1992, p. 223), local teachers and expatriate experts belong to different professional-academic cultures. As a newcomer to the indigenous professional-academic culture, the expatriate would need to start from somewhere in order to understand the local culture of teaching and provide professional assistance or guidance accordingly. The recognition of areas of common ground may, on the one hand encourage newly arrived expatriates to establish dialogue and mutual understanding with the local teachers. On the other hand, such common ground may also enable the expatriate specialists to see the extent to which local perceptions of ELT are different from their own, in consequence of differing historical, educational, sociocultural and contextual factors. However, it is of crucial importance to realise that the recognition of common ground between two professional-academic cultures is only the departure point for a long sophisticated journey of cross-cultural communication in educational development projects.

Prabhu (1990, p. 166) reminds us that the process of language acquisition—itself 'a basic human attribute'—does not vary in different contexts, therefore, 'a concentration on dissimilarities between teaching contexts is likely to obscure similarities between them.' The observed shared views on ELT between the British experts and Chinese teachers in the projects provide support for Prabhu’s arguments and indicate the potential for success of these projects. As the fieldwork was carried out after the completion of most projects, it is quite possible that the Chinese teachers’ reported beliefs and views on language teaching and learning reflected the impact of the projects, rather than their beliefs before the projects. Indeed, if their views did evolve, this shows from another perspective their willingness to change. In this study, both questionnaire and interview data have recorded Chinese teachers’ openness to methodological innovations as well as their professional motivation for improved competence and teaching performance. Such willingness and motivation, if recognised, will be a favourable factor in promoting the smooth progression of educational projects, but if ignored or overlooked, expatriate specialists could create potential barriers for their mission from the outset.

4.3. Appreciation of difference

An awareness of the nature of teachers’ personal knowledge may help to lift the veil on the belief gaps within cultures identified in this study. The observation of two distinct clusters of British specialists and their contrasting experiences in China suggests that it is important for people working in cross-cultural contexts to appreciate differences in values, beliefs and practices. The need to appreciate such differences is heavily stressed in Leach (1994, 1999) and Delens’ (1999) work. They recognise the culturally embedded perception gap between the donor and the recipient, and maintain that an awareness of ‘culturally determined differences in values and attitudes’ (Delens, 1999, p. 354) is of the essence in educational development projects. Leach (1999) concludes that an important lesson that donors should learn is that:

… donors need to exercise a little humility and recognise that others, albeit poor and powerless, have valuable knowledge and skills to contribute to the development process. People’s culture and heritage, from which they draw strength, should be built on, not ignored. Development initiatives have largely ignored or undervalued local knowledge, while still paying lip service to its importance, and in so doing have failed to take on board the “multiple realities” (Fullan, 1991) to people’s lives. (Leach, 1999: 391, author’s italics)

It is likely that, from the outset, the progress of the projects will have been strongly influenced by the
extent to which external experts were able to appreciate the strengths of indigenous teaching practices and to reflect on their contextually constructed professional knowledge. Markee (1997) draws from his experience as a language teaching expert on a British Council ELT project in Sudan to warn language teaching professionals that they must become sensitive to sociocultural factors and their potential impacts on a project’s success or failure. In this current paper the ‘Relative’ cluster specialists’ cross-cultural and contextual sensitivity and their appreciation of the local teaching experience were reflected in the strategies that they adopted to approach the projects. Evidence of such an influence on strategies is provided by the following quotation.

The way I approached the project was to try to look for, or try to present various methods, not just the communicative method, but other methods of teaching English language. I believe if the trainee teachers could then see these methods, they could then evaluate them. The idea was for them to evaluate them, and for them to assimilate those methods within their own teaching and learning context. (British respondent C)

This quotation demonstrates a willingness to work collaboratively with local teachers in the local educational context to achieve a shared goal of improving language teaching practice. Notions of the ownership of innovations and ethnocentricity are also evident in the above quotation. Kennedy (1988) provides a careful analysis of the importance of ‘ownership’ in achieving sustainable innovation:

Much of the literature suggests that ‘ownership’, that is the degree to which the participants feel that the innovation ‘belongs’ to them, has a considerable influence on the likelihood of any innovation establishing itself. ... The division of responsibilities between suppliers and implementers will quickly result in lack of ownership on the part of the implementers (the teachers) if they feel materials have been imposed from outside. ... Teacher-implementers have an advantage over the outsider here in that they generally possess a great deal of ‘local’ knowledge about their students and their culture and language. It may be, however, that through inadequate teacher training they do not have the knowledge required to design and write materials. The task of providing this knowledge then appropriately falls to the entrepreneur, though the process should be organised in such a way that the content is relevant to the context and is provided as and when required by the teachers, so that the concept of ownership is extended to acquisition of knowledge. (Kennedy, 1988, p. 338, author’s italics)

The issue of the power relation between donor and beneficiary in aid-funded development projects is also discussed in Leach (1994, 1999) and Delens’ (1999) research. Leach (1994, 1999) argues that it is naïve to assume knowledge is ‘in some way neutral or culture-free’ (1999, p. 384) and that it will be equally valued and directly transferred into the local practice. She criticises the tendency to perceive the values and theoretical/academic knowledge propagated through western influence as elitist and superior, and contends that ‘cultural forms imported from one environment never survive intact and without modification in a new environment’ (1994, p. 228).

Leach (1994, 1999) and Delens (1999) express similar views to Kennedy (1988), strongly emphasising that the ownership of innovations requires indigenous recipients to recognise the need for innovative ideas and perceive the proposed innovations as culturally and contextually appropriate. They argue that the explicit donor nation values embodied in development projects must not be imposed, but should be reconciled with ‘the reality on the ground’ (Delens, 1999, p. 351), so that both donors and recipients will move "from an ethnocentric perception to a non-dualistic, ‘metacultural’ perception” (Ellis, 1996, p. 217) (Delens, 1999, p. 365).

Elsewhere, Hofstede (1986) argues that

It is possible that in order to be effective as trainers abroad, teachers have to adopt methods which at home they have learned to
consider as outmoded or unpopular: usually much more structured than they were accustomed to. (1986, p. 316)

The British Council’s prescriptions for the improvement of ELT may not always accord with Chinese language teachers’ understandings of how to improve classroom outcomes. But success in implementing the British Council’s innovative methodology for the English class in China depends crucially on achieving an acceptance by Chinese teachers of English of the value of such innovations. In his article ‘Whose rules apply?’ Delens (1999) argues that in order to achieve sustainable transfer of skills and knowledge, expatriate specialists, who will have often acted as project managers in aid-funded development projects, need to ‘build on indigenous values and attitudes, and bridge the cultural gaps between donors and recipients’ (1999, p. 349).

The data considered in this paper indicate that effective implementation of the projects studied was likely to have been dependent on the establishment of mutual understanding between the British specialists and Chinese teachers and the provision of a supportive environment. The identification of the two clusters of British specialists was based on the extent to which they valued the meaning of sociocultural factors in ELT. An appreciation of ELT approaches in China in the ‘Relative’ cluster specialists did not imply that they had an overall agreement on the efficiency of Chinese ELT or that the Chinese ways of teaching ‘could not be improved upon’ (British respondent O). Social constructivism would predict that British specialists hold a range of different opinions in each of the identified clusters. Individual specialists would each perceive the local teaching methods through their personalised lenses of ELT. In addition, there was variation in the specific institutional situations in which each specialist worked. The ‘rewarding’ and enjoyable time in China described by 11 of the British specialists was most probably a result of their awareness and respect for the local contexts and professional experience, as well as the collaborative approach they adopted in working with Chinese teachers.

4.4. Perceiving difference within context

Both the interview and questionnaire work directly address the important issue of cultural sensitivity. It is of crucial importance for external change agents (in this case the British specialists) to assess the cultural appropriateness or compatibility of innovations in relation to recipients’ (in this case the Chinese teachers’) current practices (Markee, 1997, p. 13) and be ready to make changes if necessary. Holliday (1994) looks at the wider social context of language teaching and strongly recommends a culture-sensitive approach to achieving an appropriate adaptation of aid-funded ELT projects to the local context (see Fig. 3). Understanding socially and contextually constructed knowledge in context is the key theme of this paper, and it is argued that such an understanding should permeate the whole process of teacher-training programmes in cross-cultural settings.

Fullan (1982, p. 107) argues that ‘Educational change depends on what teachers think and do—it is as simple and as complex as that.’ In INSET programmes the introduction of methodological change will equally depend on what the teacher educator change agents think and do. These change agents represent the donor organisation by seeking to carry out their mission of knowledge and/or technology transfer and are a key to the success of a project. In cross-cultural settings their role will be challenging because as the evidence above shows successful project design is likely to require that change agents perceive and understand the beliefs and knowledge of teaching embedded in a context that encompasses different, sometimes contrasting, sociocultural values and ideological norms. Failure to accommodate the implications of these different values and views will be likely to be interpreted as being ethnocentric and lead to conflicts and dilemmas. Such potential dilemmas are likely to have been the cause of the ‘emotionally demanding’ experiences recorded by the ‘Normative’ cluster specialists that have been noted above.

Hence such change agents need to develop a realisation of the contextualised nature of professional knowledge, an appreciation of a different
teaching and learning culture, and a willingness to establish dialogue in order to bridge the belief gap across cultures. In Kennedy’s (1987, p. 167) view, the success of a programme is likely to rest on the extent to which any different attitudes to language teaching and learning can be openly discussed and resolved. Hofstede (1986, p. 301) suggests that the burden of adaptation should rest primarily with the teacher. By extension, in the projects discussed here, logic suggests that the burden of adaptation should rest primarily on the expatriate teacher educators. They may need to take one step back from their values and ‘cherished beliefs’ and get ‘intellectually and emotionally accustomed to the fact that in other societies,’ people teach and learn in different ways (Hofstede, 1986, p. 316). In Kennedy and Kennedy’s views (1998, p. 458), no matter how good or logical some ideas might seem in the generating culture, they cannot be automatically transferred into another culture that may hold different values.

It is worth noting that in practical exercises in cross-cultural communication there could be a counterproductive ‘tendency to ascribe fixed characteristics’ (Pennycook, 1998, p. 188) or stereotyped thinking if the local beliefs are perceived in a narrow sense. This author introduces the notion of cultural fixity:

The importance of this notion is that it opens up a way of looking at cultural constructions not so much in terms of whether they are right or wrong but rather in terms of how they have become deterministically fixed. ... It has already become clear from the above examples that not only are Chinese learners constructed in particular ways but they are also fixed in these ways of behaving. They are seen as belonging to a ‘traditional’ and static culture which defines their thoughts and behaviours. (1998, p. 188)

The implication is that, professionals working in cross-cultural settings need to keep an open mind because the local culture, as well as people within the culture, change and develop as time goes on. The data collected for this paper show that both the British specialists and the Chinese teachers’ beliefs and views underwent continuous growth and development that was a result of the ongoing impact of the projects. To address sustainability concerns the ultimate aims of such projects should be concerned with enabling teachers to develop from the competence-oriented end of a professional development continuum to the meaning-building end that requires rationalised reflection of teaching practice and professional empowerment.

4.5. Change forces from within

The research carried out for this study points to some of the potential hazards of entering the arena of Chinese educational culture with pre-conceived western views on the application of language policy and language teaching theory. The western approach, with its distinct educational and ideological differences from traditional Chinese values is likely to fail in an aim of establishing sustainable innovation in Chinese practice. The sustainability of innovation comes from a local willingness to promote the change, and requires substantial adaptation of the Western approach. Failure to secure such local support is likely to invite resistance and could lead to conflicts and tensions in aid projects. Such conflicts are driven by deeply rooted sociocultural factors and differing ideological values. Leach
(1999) looks at donors’ lessons from the mistakes of the past and observes that

The second lesson, a sobering one for donors, is that despite the huge sums of money and unlimited “expertise” at their disposal, the best known and most successful projects have tended to be “home grown”; in other words, they have been initiated by individuals or groups working directly with communities in the countries concerned, with few resources and little influence. (1999, p. 390)

Curriculum innovations and educational change are of little value if they are restricted to the policy level. The study suggests that rather than a focus on the transfer of technical skills in classrooms, successful long-term impacts depend upon securing cognitive professional growth and empowerment for those who are the front line communicators of the innovation: the teachers. Both western donor organisations and the local educational governments therefore need to respect and work with teachers’ professional beliefs.

5. Conclusions

This study argues that the key to successful cross-cultural communication is an informed appreciation of the perception gap that separates donor and recipient. The investigation of British Council ELT projects in China clearly shows that the perception gap results from expatriate and indigenous actors’ differing assumptions about and interpretations of the local context and its impact on the local knowledge base and professional practices. Cultural sensitivity and the use of a culturally appropriate methodology are of fundamental importance in educational aid projects in cross-cultural contexts. It is argued that at the macro-level, factors such as supportive policies and leadership and generous resourcing will facilitate the progress of department-based teacher-training projects. However, this study strongly suggests that ensuring a high quality communication between the expatriate specialist and the local teacher is a key priority in a sustainable educational development programme.

A significant finding of this study is the observation of a substantial amount of common ground in perceptions, values and beliefs of British specialists and Chinese teachers. These shared values, in addition to local teachers’ professional motivation and willingness to change, create a platform for people with different sociocultural backgrounds to work together towards shared goals. This potential basis for dialogue and mutual understanding in a cross-cultural setting is likely to outweigh the barriers provided by difference and resistance which have tended to attract the principal attention in educational development programmes.

Implementing educational innovation across cultures is not merely a methodological issue, but also a complex ideological matter driven by political, sociocultural and economic forces. Innovation is unlikely to result in change if it is not reconciled with values and professional practices shared in the target social and cultural context. To achieve sustainable impacts in cascade or imported educational reforms, western organisations and the local educational governments need to take into account the values of front line professionals and their views on educational cultures. Teachers are front line change agents in educational reforms. What these change agents believe and do can profoundly affect the extent to which educational change is carried out in practice. Furthermore, because professional growth and change is a slow, cognitive process that involves the reconceptualisation of educational values, beliefs and assumptions, a collaborative approach and a supportive environment are of crucial importance in achieving accommodation and assimilation of differing views and values. The key to successful long-term educational change lies in the development of local teachers’ self-reflexive competence and professional empowerment—qualities that transcend cultural borders.

References