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Domestication of Audiolingualism in ELT in China: From the Perspective of Cultural Accommodation

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Abstract
Audio Lingual Method (ALM) or Audiolingualism is a language teaching methodology introduced in the 1950s in the western world. It was later domesticated in a painless way in Chinese foreign language pedagogy—in contrast to the Chinese cultural resistance to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in China. The paper explores why Audiolingualism is not inimical to the Chinese culture of learning while CLT seems to have encountered cultural resistance, although both approaches are of foreign origin. By putting a number of issues under scrutiny, the paper contends that the Chinese adoption of ALM, and coolness towards CLT, had deep roots in traditional Chinese culture and philosophy of education.

Key words: Audiolingualism; Chinese culture; Pedagogical imports; Foreign language teaching

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INTRODUCTION
Recent research on ELT and ELL in China has reached the conclusion that traditional approaches (grammar-translation method and ALM) are still dominant in many a classroom and memorisation has remained among the most valued learning strategies among English learners (e.g. Hu, 2001, 2002, 2005). The traditional approach to ELT in China is considered to be a

> curious combination of the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism, which is characterised by systematic and detailed study of grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, *memorisation of structural patterns* and vocabulary, painstaking effort to *form good verbal habits*, and emphasis on written language, and a preference for literary classics. (Hu, 2002, p.93; emphasis added)

Although the Chinese version of audolingualism (emphasis attached to written language and literary classics) is interestingly contrasted with the original Western version which was developed to enhance conversational proficiency, it is undoubtedly domesticated in a painless way in the Chinese culture of pedagogy (in contrast to the cultural resistance to CLT in China (cf. Hu, 2002).

The successful integration of ALM into the traditional Chinese approach was attributed to the compatibility of some of its practices (e.g. emphasis on memorisation as a useful learning strategy) with the Chinese culture of learning (Ibid.). My position is stronger than that. Going beyond the importance attached to memorisation, we may find that the methodological considerations underlying ALM are strikingly consistent with Chinese conceptions of learning and teaching. The ensuing discussion will focus on audiolingualist understanding of three important issues in relation to memorisation, a highly valued way of learning in China.

1. AUDIOLINGUALISM AND CHINESE CULTURE OF LEARNING

1.1 Linguistic "Beachheads"
The practice of memorizing useful dialogues, according to Lado (1964, p.62), gives the students "the power to

hear, recall, understand, and speak the material" and thus helps them to establish a "linguistic beachhead". This is to say, the memorized conversational basics can enable the students to master the necessary bits of language in order to move towards a higher grade of dialogues. Incremental memorization of dialogues or other materials produces a "snowball effect", referring to the process that starts with an initial state of small magnitude or significance and gradually builds upon itself, becoming larger in space or deeper in degree. Utterances previously memorized by the students are expected to contribute to the understanding or mastery of later introduced ones, thus adding to their "beachhead" in the target language. It is hoped that "[A]fter the first few dialogues, the student may know enough of the language to understand new dialogues with the explanation of a few new words in the target language itself" (Lado, 1964, p.68). Clearly, memorization is supposed to be functioning as a strategic tool through which learning reinforces itself in a virtuous circle.

The idea that the learner's prior knowledge offers a starting point for learning what is to be learned is not new. According to Batstone (2002, p.221), it is well established (and has a long and distinguished history) that "we use what we already know to throw light on what we do not yet know". As early as in the 1930s, Dewey (1939, p.27) recognised the importance of the experience learners already have, and noted that "this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning". Furthermore, the association of prior knowledge with what is learned is considered a prerequisite for memorisation: "It is impossible to remember without associating new information with what you already know" (Cromley, 2000, p.4). While the significance of the facilitative role of prior knowledge in acquiring new knowledge may not be necessarily distinctive to Audiolingualism, it is apparently a salient feature in the structuralist-behaviourist tradition of ALM which encourages habit formation through pattern practice and analogical extension of structural patterns.

This belief is also reflected in a Confucian quote "wen gu er zhi xin" [meaning "One gains new knowledge by reviewing the old"]. That is to say, constantly reviewing what they have already learned to help students to consolidate the old knowledge so as to serve as a scaffold to acquire new knowledge. Knowledge is generally regarded in Chinese learning culture as inherently divisible into small blocks, one of which leads on to the next—A leads on to B which in turn leads on to C (Brick, 1991). When it now comes to learning a language, it is like climbing the ladder—"as long as the first rung is firm, the learner can easily climb to the second rung, and so on" (Brick, 1991, p.154). It is believed that things are learned little by little, one after another as the original knowledge is built upon or grows out of the old one. This is noticeably similar to the Audiolingualist position that the additional incremental steps of learning were supposed to be very small and controlled so that learners would learn efficiently. That is why in traditional family schools, "the class begins with the reviewing of the material learned the day before (recitation), followed by the new material" (Shu, 1961; Chinese original). In fact, the reviewing of learning is part of the three major principles of Confucian education. At the beginning of Analects, Confucius himself was quoted as saying, "*xue er shi xi zhi, bu yi le hu*" ["Learning with frequent reviewing, what a pleasure this is!"]. This remark was often used to encourage students to engage in repeated going-over of what is learnt, this is because, through review, a student can not only retain the old, but comes to understand the new (cf. Louie, 1986). From the foregoing discussion, it appears that the Confucian educational tradition is culturally friendly to the epistemology of the "linguistic beachhead" underlying ALM.

1.2 Memorisation and Creative Use

In addition to penetrating the language, the chief value in memorisation, from an audiolingualist viewpoint, is to provide the student with "authentic sentences that he can vary and expand and eventually use in many situations" (Lado, 1964, p.62). On this view, it is not the audiolingualists' intention to render the students parrot learners who are merely able to imitate and repeat what is memorised. Instead, the ultimate goal of memorisation is to enable the students to use the sentence patterns contained in the dialogues they commit to memory in a creative manner. Taking this logic step further, Lado speculates,

> If our students could memorise large amount of the language, say ten plays or a full-length novel, they might be pretty advanced in the language. (Lado, 1964, p. 62)

A corollary of this is the case that the quantity of memorisation also counts, namely, how much is memorised. Following this reasoning, the ALM perspective implies that a considerable amount of language instances learned by heart may significantly increase the possibility of being highly proficient in the target language.

This assumption that substantial memorisation of language examples might contribute to the eventual creative use of that language is also reflected by a well-known Chinese saying, "When one memorises 300 Tang poems, he is sure to be able to compose poems of his own even though he is not a poet". This can be seen as a folk theory of implicit learning (cf. Gu, 2003). This belief reflects the typical Chinese attitude towards learning and teaching that "learners must first master the basics and only when this is accomplished are they in a position to use what they have mastered in a creative manner" (Brick, 1991, p.154). To quote a Chinese idiom—"The loftiest towers are built up from the ground."—if creative use of language can be figuratively said to be the loftiest tower, it must be building upon the ground of the mastery of

basics, either it be language blocks, discourses or written texts, and memorisation may be the most comfortable way for Chinese learners to approach such mastery for certain reasons (e.g. capable of doing this) before easy alternatives to practice of intensive memorisation of materials are available.

1.3 Meaning and Repetition

When dealing with the issue of putting the meaning across, Lado offers the following view:

No harm will result if the student does not grasp every detail of the meaning of the dialogue as long as he can say it with ease and accuracy. The meaning will be brought out by repeated use of the dialogue" (Lado, 1964, p.68).

Thus, Lado has suggested that accurate reproduction of the dialogue in a proficient model is paramount. Meaning, if not understood through classroom explanation, may come out as a result of repetitive rehearsal of the dialogue. Similarly, the Confucian tradition of learning firmly believes in the role of repetition in assistance with bringing out understanding. For instance, Chinese learners may have been convinced that "the meaning manifest itself after one reads one hundred times" (*shu du bai bian, qi yi zi xian*). The belief may well be traced back to the following annotation by a famous philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in Song Dynasty:

> … In reading we must first become intimately familiar with the text so that its words seem to come from our own mouth. We should then continue to reflect on it so that its ideas seem to come from our own minds. Only then can there be real understanding. (Translation from Gardner, 1990, p.43)

According to Zhu Xi, understanding is deemed to be attainable through repetitive learning leading to memorisation. In other words, memorisation can precede understanding. It is not surprising to find that some Chinese learners memorise in the first instance in order to understand later (Marton, Wen, & Wong, 2005). It is a century-old Chinese approach to learning that texts, or exemplars worthy of imitation are learned by heart, "whose words learned now will be cognitively internalised and later understood—perhaps—in a long apprenticeship which will lead to ultimate mastery" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p.184).

As is clear from the preceding discussion, some assumptions underpinning Audiolingualism are analogous to the maxims of Chinese philosophy of learning. As a Western scholar observed, "[T]he Chinese attitude to learning and teaching has something in common with traditional Western attitudes" (Brick, 1991, p.154).

2. THE DECLINE OF ALM

Recent development in applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and corpus linguistics has led to increasing recognition of the memory-based aspect of language. Consequently, theory in ALM as well as its pedagogical practice or implications in foreign language learning was recently reappraised from an applied psycholinguistic perspective after 50 years of exile. For instance, both Ding's (2007) qualitative study and Yu's (2009) classroom experimental study produced the result that text memorisation facilitates "noticing" and learning chunks.

Despite a few researchers' (notably Nick Ellis) intention to restore a good name for ALM, however, it cannot be denied that the era of Audio-Lingual supremacy in foreign language instruction was relatively short-lived and Lado's work is of little current influence. ALM fell from favour in FLT in the 1970s following eventual reaction against Lado's implementation of his theory in the ALM, although it is too early to conclude that this teaching method has died out in the Western language classrooms. In an attempt to explain why ALM became unfashionable, Ellis (2002, p.177) concludes among other things:

> Despite his [Lado's] premise of language learning as the learning of patterns of expression, content, and their association, the ALM involved "mimicry-memorisation" in pattern drills in which the role of understanding was minimised as much as possible.

Given this explication, it would seem that memorisation was extensively utilised at the expense of meaning in ALM as "the major emphasis was on the mechanical production of the utterance as a language form" (Ellis, 2002, p.177). One caveat made for ALM is that this method, at its worst, may involve "mindless repetition and meaningless drills" (Ibid). In a word, the fact that ALM failed to have continuing influence in language teaching might be attributable to Lado's operationalization of behaviourist principles (cf. Skinner, 1957) of learning "at the expense of language and the learner" (Ellis, 2002, p.177). It was criticised for being "formulated by linguists to satisfy the interests and beliefs of linguists, with little regard for the intellectual and psychological motivations of teachers and learners" (Scott, 1983, p.15) and the excessive dependence on manipulation drills of this method "most certainly resulted in de-humanising the teaching and learning of foreign languages" (Scott, 1983, p.17). Thus, a more humanistic way of learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), came into being partly as a reaction to the deficiency of ALM.

3. ALM AND CLT IN CHINA

Interestingly, yet not surprisingly, the inhuman elements of ALM seem not to have caused a major problem or aroused resistance in ELT in China. Although convinced of the significance of memorising large amounts of language, audiolingualists realised that to memorise material in a foreign language is much more difficult

than memorising it in the native one, therefore taking too much time and effort (Lado, 1964, p.62). This task is considered "hopeless" (Ibid) because it is understood that the task of memorisation usually "requires hours of tiring work, and is not really an easy way out" (Sivell, 1980, p.52). However, a seemingly hopeless task is thought not impossible if enormous effort and time is invested in the context of the Chinese culture of learning where effort, determination, steadfastness of purpose, perseverance, and patience, rather than intelligence and ability, are generally viewed as the determinants of educational achievement. The emphasis on effort is recounted in many vivid Chinese sayings or folk stories. For example, "A piece of iron can be ground into a needle as long as one perseveres in doing it" (*zi yao gong fu shen, tie bang mo cheng zeng*) is a household aphorism still used to encourage children to strive their hardest. The story of "*Yugong yi san*" (concerning a man called Yugong showed his disbelieving townsfolk that it was possible to move a mountain if one persisted year after year on the project) was more often than not quoted in official slogans going more or less like "We can achieve our goal of … if we uphold the spirit of '*Yugong yi san*'". Mottoes that portray the productive consequences of hard work include: "The rock can be transformed into a gem only through daily polishing." A summary of the belief in hard work can be found in the writing of the Chinese philosopher Hsun Tzu:

> Achievement consists of never giving up. … If there is no dark and dogged will, there will be no shining accomplishment; if there is no dull and determined effort, there will be no brilliant achievement. (Quoted in Watson, 1967, p.18)

The basic precept of the above quotes is that one has to be willing to pay a great deal of time and effort on study, even on apparently boring tasks if one aspires to high academic achievement. Thus, when it comes to foreign language learning, the involvement of tremendous time investment and arduous work are taken as an obligatory price paid for proficiency rather than a deficit inherent in a particular learning or teaching method.

In addition to being over-demanding on time and effort, a major vulnerability in ALM lies in its under-emphasis on getting meaning across. Lado (1964, p.67) admits that "[I]n most cases putting the meaning across is a minor part of teaching a dialogue". This flaw is overcome in international models of CLT by proposing a "learn by using" approach in which learners are encouraged to communicate in the target language from the very beginning. However, this idea seems not to arouse the enthusiasm of Chinese English learners and teachers.

The potential cultural root of their reluctance to embrace CLT and other meaning-oriented methods again derives from general Chinese educational culture. Learning has been traditionally viewed in China more as a process of accumulating knowledge and reading books than as a practical process of constructing and using knowledge for immediate purpose (Hu, 2002; Yu, 1984). The accumulation of knowledge and the use of it is likened to save money in the bank and spending it later: "When you put your money in the bank it is not important to be sure what you are going to do with it. But when you do need the money for some emergency, it is there for you to use" (Yu, 1984, p.35). That is say, the knowledge you have learned may not be of immediate use at the moment, but it is ready at your disposal when you have to use it at some point. The importance of accumulating knowledge is supported by the Chinese saying: "When it comes for you to use your knowledge, you will regret reading too little" (*shu dao yong shi fang hen shao*). Though the importance of the application of knowledge is commonly recognised by Chinese learners (cf. Wang, 2001), using knowledge is hardly thought to be a parallel process to accumulating knowledge; rather, this is a sequential process with the use of knowledge preceded by accumulation of knowledge. Moreover, it is considered that one is unlikely to be able to apply what one has already learned without a reasonable amount of absorption of knowledge involving a long period. Clearly, the conception of "learn to use" does not fit very well with the theory of immediate need as the starting point in learning as is indicated by the principle of "learn by use" in CLT.

If this cultural background explains why Chinese language learners are not daunted by effort-taking and time-consuming boring tasks, Western language teachers have always been perplexed by the fact that they are unable to convert the Chinese students to a communicative way of English learning which is "humanistic in nature" (Hu, 2002, p.95). CLT prides itself in taking the drudgery out of the learning process and injecting elements of entertainment, such as various language games, so as to make language learning become a light-hearted and pleasant experience. Many Chinese learners, however, feel uncomfortable with this imported approach. Brought up in a context where learning is regarded as a serious undertaking which is least likely to be associated with light-heartedness, Chinese learners naturally "tend to associate games and communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are sceptical of their use as learning tool" (Rao, 1996, p.467). This is attested by one of my previous students who commented: "It seems to be fun in a classroom full of game-like activities, but you learn little compared to the traditional way of teaching" (Zhanfeng, personal communication, 2006). It is not that Chinese students are genetically different from Western students in terms of being open to enjoyment and pleasure; rather, they are not convinced of the overriding importance of oral interaction in the classroom, especially, among a group of learners and in an entertaining way.

As is clear from the forgoing discussion, what are seen as serious problems associated with ALM approach to language learning or teaching from the Western point

of view may not necessarily cause strong reactions or resistance among Chinese learners. Likewise, what makes intuitive sense to many language teaching specialists in the West is likely to encounter scepticism from learners and teachers in a different learning context. With this in mind, we may be in a better position to understand why ALM has been successfully incorporated into ELT in China while it fell from favour in the West classroom and why text memorisation in English classes can be arguably associated with ALM methodologically despite its indigenous origin in the traditional Chinese way of learning classics. This also explains why some Chinese English teachers thought that more humanistic Western approaches to English teaching, though admittedly dynamic and creative, are difficult to apply in Chinese cultural context: "Chinese don't think in the way most Westerners think" (Burnaby & Sun, 1989, p.229). Indeed, a particular methodology, no matter how logical the underlying principles are, "offers a potential but does not in itself guarantee that a given result will be obtained" (Tudor, 2001, pp.7-8).

On the other hand, Chinese investment of effort in mastery of English through memorisation, which may give them a sense of progress and achievement (Yu, 2014), crucial to morale, may not necessarily be in opposition to a change towards a more communicative direction.

SUMMARY

In foreign language education, repetition and memorization have long been imprinted with the mark of language learning with Chinese characteristics. Consequently, these features are being indiscriminately interpreted as primitive and obsolete according to current Western notions of English language teaching. Learning or teaching methods adopted by "cultural others" (Pennycook, 1996, p.218) are seen as deficient rather than different. Memorization has always been derided as outmoded or inferior pedagogical practice along with its assumed Chinese birthmark. It could be argued that this is a kind of cultural imperialism as "there is no reason to suppose that one culture of learning is superior to another" (Kennedy, 2002, p.442). Imitation and memorization, as was shown in the foregoing discussion, are by no means unique to Chinese language learners. In other words, heavy use of memorization is not non-existent in pedagogies of Western origin. The reason why ALM, as opposed to CLT, was successfully integrated into ELT in China while it fell from favours in the West as early as half a century ago is that the methodological principles underlying ALM coincide with the memorization-emphasized Chinese culture of learning. The key point lies in that problem with the ALM identified through the lens of western culture seem to have not constituted insurmountable barriers in the eyes of learners bred in Chinese culture. It is thus crucial for educational linguists and practitioners to make well-informed pedagogical evaluation or choices that is grounded in a thorough understanding of "culture of learning" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) when they are dealing with learners in an intercultural communication contexts.

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