

Understanding Factors that Influence Chinese English Teachers' Decision to Implement Communicative Activities in Teaching

Jiuhan Huang

Oral Roberts University, U.S.A.

This study described factors that influenced Chinese middle school English teachers' decision to implement communicative activities in teaching. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was utilized as a theoretical framework to analyze the data. Chinese middle school English teachers' attitude in using communicative activities, their social pressure, and their perceived behavioral control over using these activities were described along with their opinions of the 11 communicative activities that were demonstrated at a workshop. Quantitative data were collected with a survey for the 101 workshop participants. In addition, qualitative data were collected through interviews (n = 15), telephone conversations (n = 7), e-mail exchanges (n = 5) and follow-up surveys (n = 13). Data revealed teachers' relatively positive attitude towards the using of the communicative activities and five barriers of implementation of these communicative activities. Two groups of people, parents of the students and schools, were identified as major influencing force in influencing teachers' decision to implement the activities. Three groups of activities were categorized according to their popularity with the teachers. Suggestions for teacher training programs were made based on these findings.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing involvement of China in world affairs has made it necessary for the country to become part of the global English-speaking community. However, the traditional English teaching method in Chinese middle schools is a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method with an emphasis on rote memory (Penner, 1995). Because the traditional way of English teaching cannot meet the needs of the rapid development of China, the government has called for an educational reform in language teaching, which was manifested in the document *English Standards for Compulsory Education and Senior Middle Schools (New Standards)* (Ministry of Education, 2001). The *New Standards* specify that the goal of language teaching is to improve communicative competence of students with focus on language skills, language knowledge, emotional competence, learning strategies, and cultural awareness. With communicative language teaching as the general approach, the *New Standards* promote a task-based teaching method in which students learn how to use the language in the process of fulfilling different 'real-world' tasks. The task-based teaching represents a particular realization of communicative language teaching (Nunan, 2001).

The *New Standards* represent a paradigm shift from the traditional language teaching in China. To make the successful shift, teachers must go through training (Yu, 2001). However, questions remain about how to develop effective teacher training models (Wu, 2001). The key to an effective training program is how much the knowledge from training changes practice (Houle, 1980). Teacher trainers must know what factors influence teaching practice in order to make training effective. Research studies on the adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT) in China have investigated teachers' and students' beliefs, attitudes, and values associated with CLT and the constraints of implementing CLT in China. For example, the national exam system (Anderson, 1993; Hird, 1995), large class size (Anderson, 1993), lack of motivation or poor skills of the students (Sun & Cheng, 2000; Rao, 2002), inadequate language proficiency of the teachers (Liao, 2000; Penner,

1995; Zhang, 1997), and lack of resources (Penner, 1995) have been identified as barriers towards implementation of CLT in China. However, there has been a lack of theoretical framework that connects these beliefs with classroom teaching; such a framework might provide models for effective teacher training programs. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has the potential to serve as that framework.

The Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2002; Ajzen & Madden, 1986) represents a compelling and well-established model not only for the prediction of intentional behavior but also for understanding factors leading to behavior. According to TPB, the immediate predictor of behavior is the intention to carry out the behavior. Intention is in turn determined by three other variables: (a) the attitude toward the behavior, (b) subjective norm, and (c) perceived behavioral control. The attitude toward the behavior represents the individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior such as using communicative activities in English teaching. This attitude is formed through beliefs of the potential outcomes of carrying out the behavior such as increasing students' interest in learning English or covering less material in class. As the expectation that the behavior will produce valued outcomes increases, the individual's attitude toward the behavior is presumed to be more favorable.

The subjective norm reflects the influence of the perceived opinions of the important others such as students' parents, school administration, or business community on the behavior. The subjective norm is relative to the extent the important others think the individual should perform the behavior and the extent this individual is willing to comply with those referents. For example, the subjective norm is lower when the parents' of the students do not wish the teacher to use communicative activities in teaching, and the parents' opinion is very important to the teacher.

Finally, perceived behavioral control is the perceived ease or difficulty of

performing the behavior. It reflects the perceived ability of the individual to overcome hindrances of performing the behavior. For example, if the individual perceives that personal inadequate communicative competence would make it difficult to perform the behavior, the perceived behavioral control is low. As a general rule, as a person's positive perception of the outcome of a behavior increases, as the opinion of the important others toward the behavior becomes more favorable, and as the more perceived control the person has over the behavior increases, a person's intention to perform the behavior becomes stronger. This intention is assumed to be the immediate antecedent of behavior. TPB has been used extensively to predict intention and identify factors that influence human social behavior in many fields including education (e.g., Ajzen, 2001; Armitage & Conner, 2001).

Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) were among the first in the field to draw on the ideas of Theory of Planned Behavior to explain the complexity between teachers' attitude and behavior in an EFL setting in China. In illustrating a mismatch between a teacher's expressed attitudes towards error correction and the teacher's actual behavior in the classroom, they suggested using TPB for an explanation. It was the perceived behavioral control at work – the teacher perceived that it would be easier to continue using the strategy of immediate error correction with which she was comfortable even though she knew it was not effective. Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) noted that:

Such illustrations and their explanation may also help to explain the dismay expressed by writers on curriculum development when teachers apparently enthusiastic when presented with a particular methodology, for example at in-service seminars, return to their schools where the enthusiasm does not appear to be sufficient for them to change their practices in the classroom. (p. 158)

Communicative Activities

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is best defined as an approach rather than a method (Richards & Rogers, 1986). It covers a broad range of

principles for enhancing communicative competence (Brown, 2000). Communicative activities are an important part of CLT. They are activities that learners are engaged in where their main purpose is to communicate meanings effectively (Littlewood, 1981). Some of the communicative activities are games, information sharing activities, task-based activities, social interaction, and functional communication practice (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Activities that are communicative aim to replicate as far as possible the real-life communication. Three characteristics of real-life communication are (a) information gap: the purpose of communication is to bridge the information gap; (b) choice: participants of communication have a choice as to what to say and how to say it; and (c) feedback: the participants give feedback to one another such as agreeing, disagreeing, and accepting or rejecting (Morrow, 1981).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe factors that influence Chinese English teachers' decision to implement communicative activities in teaching. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was used as a theoretical framework to interpret and explain these factors. Specific beliefs of the three TPB variables of attitude towards the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control were examined. These factors were further examined by assessing what kinds of communicative activities were more likely to be implemented. Descriptions of these factors suggested some of the guidelines for teacher training in China.

METHOD

Participants and Communicative Activities Workshop (CAW)

According to TPB (Ajzen, 2002), the behavior of interest should be

defined in terms of its action, target, context, and time elements. It is important that all the TPB constructs of intention, attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control be defined in terms of the exact same elements. In this study, the behavior was defined as implementing (action) communicative activities (target) in the classroom (context) in the spring semester of 2004 (time). In order to further define the target of the behavior, an all-day communicative activities workshop (CAW) was designed and conducted by the researcher in three locations for 101 Chinese middle school English teachers in the cities of Beijing and Shenyang. The workshop was hosted by Beijing Education College (BEC), Beijing Fengtai Education College (BFEC), and Shenyang Experimental Middle School (SEMS). Teachers from SEMS were required to attend the workshop by the school administration while the teachers from BEC and BFEC volunteered to participate the workshop.

In both BEC and BFEC, the workshop was part of a week-long teacher training on using the new textbook for *Senior 1* (first year of senior middle school) and understanding the *New Standards*. The new text book for *Senior 1* is a revised version of the series *Senior English for China* developed by the People's Education Press in collaboration with Longman and the United Nations Development Program. Currently, about 70% of secondary schools nationwide are using this series (Hu, 2002). The teachers chose to participate in the workshop in order to receive credits to fulfill requirements for the 10th 5-year professional development plan mandated by the government. The 10th 5-year professional development plan was a professional development law issued by the Ministry of Education for the 5-year period between 2001 and 2005. It required teachers to complete 36 credit hours of training during the 5-year period, which represented 360 clock hours of training. Fulfillment of the professional development requirement served as the basis for promotion and renewal of contract. Training courses for English teachers included (a) common courses such as political education, professional ethics, and psychology courses; (b) core courses such as teaching methodologies or language skills; and (c) electives.

During CAW, the general characteristics and central tenets of communicative language teaching were introduced, and 11 communicative activities were demonstrated. The 11 communicative activities were adapted from published sources written by ESL experts (Crolley, 1993; Hadfield, 1984, 1990; Isbell, 1993) and TESOL conference presentations (Heyer, 1994). They were of three types: (a) short 10-minute activities that can be incorporated into the regular class, (b) adaptable activities that can be adapted into teachers' existing teaching tasks, and (c) longer communicative games. Table 1 lists the activities presented at the workshop.

There are a myriad of communicative activities designed to help increase the communicative competence of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. These activities were chosen for the workshop for the following reasons: (a) 10-minute activities could be used as warm-ups or fillers in everyday teaching, and they do not interrupt teachers regular teaching; (b) adaptable activities can be used to fit in almost any existing teaching tasks in reading, writing, speaking, and listening; (c) due to the large class size of most Chinese middle schools, all the activities can be done in pairs or small groups which could be arranged without much physical movement of the students; and (d) most of the activities were engaging, relatively easy to prepare, and could be used over and over again.

TABLE 1
Communicative Activities

	Activities	Communicative Elements
10- Minute Activities	Telling Jokes: Half of the class listen to one joke while the other half block their ears. Then vice versa. Students form pairs to tell each other the joke they heard (Heyer, 1994).	Students listen with a purpose: they must understand the meaning in order to retell it. Students have a choice about how to get meaning across. Feedback is received when others laugh at the joke.
	Conversation Wheels: Wheels can be made with a stack of cards and a spinner. Each card is divided into sections and conversation topics are written on the sections. In groups students take turns to spin and talk. Cards can be changed periodically (Heyer, 1994).	Students are given opportunities to talk about different topics interesting to them and learn about one another. Interaction with one another helps build learning community.
	Keep Talking: Students choose a letter, generate nouns/topics beginning with the letter. Pairs choose a topic and keep talking for 2-3 minutes (Heyer, 1994).	Fairly easy to conduct. Students have a choice about topics. The teacher makes sure that students do not stop talking. Students have to use strategies and discourse skills to keep the conversation going.
	Pair Rotation: Students or teacher generate a list of interesting topics at the beginning of a new semester. Weekly or daily the teacher writes a topic on board and pairs talk about it for a few minutes. Rotate partners and talk about the same topic. Keep rotating until the excitement level is low.	If the students get to choose topics, they will be more interested in talking about them. Rotating partners give them opportunities to practice language and generate more ideas. This can also be a good preparation for writing journals or essays.
	Black Magic: A helper is chosen who is informed of the trick. The teacher asks students to pick something in the classroom to be "it" without the teacher being there. The teacher tells them she/he has magic power and knows what "it" is. The helper will ask the teacher yes/no questions. The teacher knows if the helper picks something black, the next question is "Yes" (Heyer, 1994).	This can be classified as a "pre-communicative activity" (Littlewood, 1981). It helps learners with limited proficiency understand and use the language.

Adaptable Activities	<p>Team Comprehension: Assign one article or half of the same article to one group. Assign another or the other half of the same article to another group. Groups read together and write 3-4 questions about their reading. (Examples should be given about writing clear and correct questions) Exchange the questions and articles with another group (Isbell, 1993).</p>	<p>This can be an alternative way of testing. Many communicative elements are involved: students are given opportunity to direct their own learning, they need to read in order to fill the information gap, answers to the questions serve as feedback from the other group, they must use correct grammatical structures to convey meaning successfully.</p>
	<p>Weaving the Web: Teacher writes the topic in the center of the board and encourage students to generate ideas about the topic. The teacher connects the ideas to the topic in the form of a web (Sayavedra, 1993).</p>	<p>Stimulate students' prior knowledge about a topic before introducing the new reading. Reading will be more meaningful and relevant to the students. Discussion can be stimulated. This can be used before introducing any new reading passage.</p>
	<p>Speed Reading; Questions are cut into strips and put on the desk face down. Students take turns to be the reader of a question. Everybody has to listen and understand the question before they can start scanning. The one with most questions answered correctly is the winner (Crolley, 1993).</p>	<p>Being able to locate information in a quick fashion is an important skill. Reading strategies are practiced and utilized in this exercises. Speaking clearly and listening carefully are also involved. They must also work cooperatively and observe rules.</p>
Communicative Games	<p>Relatively Speaking: Pictures of people, places, and machines are cut and put face down in the middle of a group. Students take turns to pick up a picture and give definitions of the picture. The one who guesses right gets awarded of the picture (Hatfield, 1984).</p>	<p>Gives opportunity to practice the grammar structure of adjective clauses in the context.</p>
	<p>Detective Story: Paper with a list of events are cut and shuffled. Groups work together to put these events in order and decide if the suspect has the time to commit the murder (Hatfield, 1990)</p>	<p>Involves many communicative elements. Students work together (cooperative learning) to identify the connection between events (discourse competence). Knowledge of verb tenses is put to test in the context. Students have to negotiate meaning before reaching consensus.</p>

Where Am I? Pictures of places are cut and put face down in the center of a group. Students take turns picking up a picture and saying what is permissible and not permissible in the place. Other students guess what the place is. They can ask questions using modal verbs (Hatfield, 1984).	Grammatical structures are practiced in context. Strategies are needed to prevent others from guessing it right. Like all the other activities, communication processes of information gap, choice, and feedback are involved in the activity.
---	--

Data Sources and Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered to describe the factors that influence the Chinese English teachers' decisions to implement communicative activities. The quantitative data were collected through the Behavioral Intention Questionnaire (BIQ), which the 101 workshop participants took. The 64-item BIQ was developed by the researcher following the guidelines from the work of Ajzen and Madden (1986), and Ajzen (2002) and was modeled after Patterson (2000). The first step in developing the BIQ was to secure salient beliefs held by middle school English teachers. Ten experts in the field were consulted and 27 beliefs were obtained. They included 12 behavioral beliefs that form the attitude, 5 normative beliefs that form the subjective norm, and 10 control beliefs that form the perceived behavioral control. The BIQ consisted of seven scales: behavioral intention and the direct and indirect measures of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control.

The qualitative data were gathered to enhance the quantitative data for more understanding of the factors that influence teachers' decision to use communicative activities. Data were collected in three ways: (a) face-to-face interviews, (b) follow-up survey, and (c) phone calls and email correspondence. During and immediately after the workshop, 15 randomly selected participants were interviewed about their beliefs in using the communicative activities in teaching. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The telephone conversations and e-mail correspondence were conducted during the collection of a follow-up survey one month after the workshop. Fifty of

the 101 teachers provided email addresses and phone numbers for further contact. Five of these teachers were interviewed by phone, and e-mail responses were secured from seven additional teachers. Telephone conversations were recorded and transcribed, and e-mail responses were saved and printed for analysis.

The follow-up survey was sent to the 50 volunteers who provided their e-mail addresses one month after the workshop was conducted. Thirteen of the 50 participants returned the survey. The follow-up survey consisted of two parts. Part I listed the 11 activities presented at the workshop, and the participants were asked to indicate a level of implementation: A--I have used this activity with my students exactly as it was presented at the workshop during this semester; B--I have used a modification of this activity with my students; C--I plan to use this activity with my students this semester, but have not used it yet; and D--I don't plan to use this activity this semester. Participants were also asked to make comments on the implementation of each of the activities. Part II of the survey consisted of nine open-ended questions: one question related to the evaluation of the workshop; six questions related to the three variables of behavioral intention: attitude towards using the communicative activities, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control; another question related to their intention to implement communicative activities in their teaching; and the last question asked for suggestions for future workshops.

RESULTS

Results from BIQ

The first question on the BIQ asked the participants about their intention to implement the communicative activities in their classroom. On a 7-point scale from 1 (Extremely Unlikely) to 7 (Extremely Likely), the overall behavioral intention score was relatively high at 5.94 (SD = 1.4). The mean

of 5.94 indicated that the participants were quite likely to implement the activities.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis examined the relative contribution of each of the three direct measures of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control to the intention of implementation. All the three variables contributed approximately equal amounts to the prediction of intention ($R = .56, p < .01$). Stepwise multiple regression analyses were also conducted to determine which salient beliefs comprising the indirect measures of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control contributed the most in predicting the overall direct measures of these variables. Four of the 12 behavioral beliefs carried the most predictive power in predicting the direct measure of attitude. The four beliefs were that communicative activities (a) help increase students' interest in learning English, (b) promote cooperative learning, (c) make teaching enjoyable, and (d) result in covering less material ($R = .72, p < .01$). Only the normative belief of expectation of parents carried power in predicting the direct measure of subjective norm ($R = .45, p < .01$). The behavioral belief that dealt with teachers' limited communicative skills carried significant power in predicting the direct measure of perceived behavioral control with a weak magnitude ($R = .31, p < .01$) (Huang, 2005).

Results from Qualitative Data

Implementation of activities. Data collected from the 13 follow-up surveys were analyzed. Although the number was small, the distribution of behavioral intention scores on the BIQ of the 13 participants was very similar to the distribution for all the participants ($n = 101$). When grouped by quartiles, the scores of the two groups were the same. It was, therefore, assumed that the 13 participants were representative of the total workshop group; thus, their implementation of the activities was representative of the 101 workshop participants.

According to the frequency count of the implementation of the 11

communicative activities based on the 13 survey participants' self-reports, the activities tended to fall into 3 groups: *useful* group, *possible implementation* group, and *do not plan to use* group. The activities that were in the *useful* group were those that were implemented by close to half or a majority of the participants either exactly as they were demonstrated at the workshop or through a modified version. Telling Jokes, Weaving the Web, and Speed Reading belong to this group. Telling Jokes was implemented by 7 of the 13 teachers, and 5 other teachers indicated they planned to use it. Only one teacher did not intend to use it in the spring semester of 2004. Weaving the Web was implemented by 6 of the 13 teachers, and 4 others indicated a plan for implementation during the semester. Speed Reading was implemented by 5 teachers but 6 others planned to implement it within the spring semester of 2004.

The activities in the *possible implementation* group had a fair utilization level. Pair Rotation and Team Comprehension fell into this category. Pair Rotation was implemented by 5 teachers, 4 others indicated they planned to use it sometime during the semester, and 4 teachers did not plan to use it. Team Comprehension was implemented by only 3 of the 13 teachers, but 6 of them indicated a plan of implementation.

The *do not plan to use* group were activities that the majority of the participants did not plan to implement. The activities of Conversation Wheels, Keep Talking, Black Magic, Relative Speaking, Detective Story, and Where Am I fall into this category.

Comments associated with each group of activities were summarized as the following:

Useful Activities group: Telling Jokes were short, fun, and easy to find although cultural jokes were not easy to understand. Speed Reading helped students locate information quickly in reading tasks, which was an important skill for test taking. The problem was some students did not observe rules. Weaving the Web was an effective way to teach reading, especially as a pre-reading activity. It also helped improve reading comprehension, which could enhance students' performance on tests.

Possible Implementation group: Pair Rotation was not hard to implement and provided a good opportunity for students to talk about topics of interest to them. It was a good way to practice speaking, but students did not know what to do in the beginning. It took too much time, and it was hard for lower level students. It was a good pre-writing activity. Team Comprehension was hard for students to come up with appropriate questions when they did not quite understand what they were reading.

Do not Plan to Use group: Relative Speaking and Where Am I were too easy for students. The students already know the grammar structures. These activities can only be used in teaching relative grammar points. Detective Story took too much time; it was too complicated. Black Magic was too easy.

Teachers' attitude toward using the activities. The qualitative data showed the participants had a mixture of attitudes toward using the communicative activities. Several advantages of using communicative activities were identified by the teachers. One advantage was the activities made learners the center of learning and brought teachers and learners closer. The second advantage of using the activities was to promote students' interest in learning English. Most teachers reported the activities motivated students to learn English. Students loved the changes the communicative activities brought to class and were happier and more active in class. The third advantage identified by the participants was that using the activities can improve relationships in the classroom. Students enjoyed working in groups and learning English in a relaxing atmosphere. Teachers found "the relationship has changed"; "Students like to talk and to be known"; "They can say what they want". Another advantage of using the activities in the classroom identified by the teachers was that they helped the students understand the purpose of learning English. As one participant wrote, the communicative activities "help the students to understand that language is more a tool than knowledge. The activities help them to use the language in real life."

However, some teachers showed resistance to communicative teaching or any new methods. They believed the main goal of an English teacher was to

help students get into college and not to communicate in English. As one teacher wrote:

There are now too many new ways to teach English and many of them are not relevant to the Chinese situation. It's chaotic! Communication is important if students are to go abroad, but my students are high school students. Their first step is to get into the university.

Some teachers expressed their opinions on the constant change of textbooks and on the *New Standards*. They said that although the change was toward a more communicative approach, all the other changes would not take effect as long as the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) did not change. NCEE has been the only access to universities for secondary graduates in China. The NCEE that the teachers referred to in this study was the Matriculation English Test (MET), one of the five tests of the NCEE. Up to 1988, 85% of the items on the test were multiple-choice and blank-filling items, which tested largely discrete-point knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary and focused on linguistic accuracy (Hu, 2002). In the late 1990s, the MET began to include such elements as reading comprehension and writing. In recent years, a listening component has been added to the exam. The Chinese teachers compared NCEE to a baton that an orchestra conductor uses to conduct music. Just as a conductor uses the baton to control the whole orchestra, NCEE controls almost all the teaching and learning processes in middle schools, especially senior middle schools, in China. Since NCEE seems to be the goal of English education in China, some teachers were resentful of the constant change of syllabi and textbooks because they still had to focus on teaching to the NCEE. As one teacher pointed out,

Without the change of NCEE, the change of syllabi or textbooks doesn't work. The new syllabus says English teaching should focus on language competency, but NCEE is the old way.

Although teachers expressed a very positive attitude toward using the

communicative activities, they were reluctant to adopt the change because of the exam system. In other words, they had a favorable attitude toward using these activities but had less perceived behavioral control over implementation. The identification of the three advantages of using communicative activities was also congruent with the four most significant beliefs in attitude.

Subjective norm. The qualitative data indicated that parents and schools played an important part in teachers' decisions to implement or not implement the communicative activities. Teachers said parents only cared about students' performance on exams, ultimately, the NCEE, which can determine the future of a student. If the teaching method resulted in improved performance, parents would approve of it. If it did not help improve the performance, they would disapprove of it. Next to the parents, schools put extra pressure on the teachers to increase students' performance on NCEE. The schools' popularity depended on the university entrance rate; for some it was the entrance rate into famous universities. Parents and schools were identified to be the key referents in teachers' decision to implement or not implement communicative activities.

Perceived behavioral control. The teachers revealed five important barriers that prevented them from implementing the communicative activities: (a) NCEE, (b) lack of time, (c) lack of control, (d) poor skills of the students, and (e) poor communication skills of the teachers.

NCEE. Almost all the teachers reported on the high pressure the NCEE placed on them. According to the teachers, the students' performance on the exam was the only evaluation of the teachers. The goal of English teaching in senior middle school was to increase students' performance on the NCEE; it was not to promote communication skills. Even though teachers reported positive attitude toward the use of communicative activities, the pressure of the exam made it difficult for them to implement the activities.

Because of the pressure of the NCEE, teachers and students, especially those of *Senior 3* (the last year of senior middle school), faced unbearable pressure everyday. One teacher gave a fairly comprehensive report on the nature of the pressure:

First, when we recruit the students, we have a rank, and when they graduate, we'll check to see if they advance in the rank or the opposite. But better be the first option. Otherwise, the teacher will certainly lose face, for one thing, and the school and students will doubt the teacher's ability, and consequently, the teacher will get less bonus. Second, in most schools, the teacher will be assigned to one class and teach from *Senior 1* to *Senior 3* all the way and then be responsible for the result of MET [the English exam of NCEE]. So *Senior 3* is the crucial time for the teachers because they are in the position to be examined. Nobody would like to see their effort of all the three years just result in nothing. And the teachers attending your workshop are the ones selected from each urban district, and they should be good teachers. Being a good teacher simply doubles the pressure. At the present *Senior 3* are making their last effort before the exam. There are three simulation tests this semester. So basically, they do not have any time for other things. They can only be engaged in doing simulation tests of all the districts.

The fact that many teachers attending the workshop were *Senior 3* teachers might explain the low return rate of the follow-up survey. They simply did not have time to implement the activities, and they felt bad about reporting the reality. This reaction of not responding in problematic situations is common in the Chinese culture. In order to avoid embarrassment and spare bad feelings of both parties, people usually react by not responding. This tendency was confirmed by one teacher who did acknowledge her embarrassment and gave reasons for not sending back the follow-up survey.

I feel ashamed to answer your e-mail so late. I am teaching *Senior 3* and preparing my students for the coming NCEE. As a result, I haven't tried any of the communicative activities although I do think they are very helpful. I plan to use them in my later teaching experience if I can teach any other grades except *Senior 3*. So I can't finish your survey this time. I'm terribly sorry and I hope to be able to do the task next semester.

Not only did *Senior 3* teachers face extreme pressure, *Junior 3* (last year in junior middle school) teachers also faced much pressure. As the teachers

reported, the biggest goal for *Junior 3* English teachers was to prepare students to pass the senior middle school entrance examination, the exam that *Junior 3* students take to enter senior middle schools. The government required a high passing rate, and teachers and schools were judged by whether or not the passing rate was achieved. Thus, the pressure of the two exams made it very difficult for teachers to implement the communicative activities, especially in *Senior 3* and *Junior 3* classes.

Lack of time and control. The words “lack of time” were mentioned more than 50 times in the qualitative data. Almost all teachers in the interviews talked about not having enough time to implement the communicative activities. They reported that there were so many required content areas to cover in class that they could not implement the activities. Some of the activities took too much class time. Teachers had to cover a lot of content areas in class because these areas would be tested in exams. One teacher said that the content they had to cover in each class was so much that they could not even spare a few minutes for the short 10-minute activities. Even though the 10-minute activities were viewed as fun, they were considered a waste of time. “In these 10 minutes, students can learn knowledge that helps them to increase scores on exams.”

With so much content to cover, the regular class time, which was from 5 to 6 hours a week, was not enough, and it did not allow time for extra communicative activities. Many teachers gave extra classes after school and on weekends to catch up with the requirements. Teachers reported the short 10-minute communicative activities could help when students were tired. They were used as a boost to get the students to learn the content areas. The large class size also resulted in prolonged time when implementing the communicative activities. Teachers said if they could squeeze in time for communicative activities, they would use the activities that would not take too much time and were easier to control. Because of the large class size, many of which were over 60 students, teachers expressed concern for lack of control when using the communicative activities. Teachers said they would choose to use the activities in which the teacher had more control over the

students.

Poor skills of the students. Some teachers reported on the poor English skills, poor study skills, and low motivation of the students that made implementation of communicative activities difficult. Teachers were reluctant to put students into groups for communicative activities because they did not have the ability to carry on conversations. Students liked activities that required them to guess words but were at a loss when they had to express opinions and share stories. They did not know what to say or do. Some teachers blamed the English teaching in elementary schools or junior middle schools for students' poor skills in English. Students' low motivation to learn English also made it hard for teachers, especially those who taught in regular schools as opposed to key schools. Students entering these schools tended to be "leftovers" after better schools picked their students and to have lower skills in English and little opportunity to use English. Another concern for teachers was students' poor study skills. Students might be highly motivated, but they were not taught how to learn.

Poor communication skills of teachers. Teachers also expressed their lack of confidence in implementing the communicative activities because of their own poor communication skills themselves. Several teachers expressed their desire to go to an English speaking country for a period of time to improve communication skills. They were willing to pay half of the cost if there were opportunities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Theory of Planned Behavior is a promising tool in building effective teacher training models. When teacher training agencies such as education colleges, language teaching experts, and curricular reform committees conduct teacher training sessions, issues at stake are how the training impacts the teaching practices. By examining and understanding the three variables that influence intentions and, therefore, the actual behavior, teacher training

agencies can target the most salient beliefs that affect behavior. The findings from this study revealed three variables related to teachers' beliefs that need to be reinforced or reconceptualized. By dealing with the most salient beliefs appropriately, more favorable attitude, higher subjective norm, and higher perceived control can result, and it is more likely that teachers will use communicative activities in their teaching English.

Attitude Toward Using the Activities

Data indicated that teachers had a positive attitude toward using the communicative activities presented at the workshop. The positive attitude came from the beliefs that the communicative activities (a) made learners the center of learning, (b) promoted students' interest in learning English, (c) improved relationships in the classroom, and (d) made learning relevant to real life. In training teachers to incorporate communicative activities, attempts should be made to help teachers understand second language learning principles that are imbedded in these beliefs. Principles such as making learning meaningful and relevant promotes learning, a supportive student-cornered learning community enhances learning, and classroom tasks that provide intrinsic motivation have a greater chance for success can help teachers understand the advantages of using communicative activities that are theory and research based and therefore enhance their positive attitude towards using communicative activities in teaching.

However, analysis of data also revealed that teachers might not understand the theories and principles behind using the communicative activities. Teachers tended to think that the communicative activities were fun and interesting but that the traditional way was the most efficient to get the content transferred to the students. Covering content areas in teaching has been associated with the traditional book-centered, teacher-centered, and grammar-centered teaching. Using communicative activities in this context might be viewed as extra load that inhibits covering prescribed content areas. In teacher training efforts, it should be emphasized that using communicative

activities is an efficient way of teaching because they help make learning more relevant and meaningful to the students. According to Ausubel's meaningful learning theory, a meaningfully learned item is much more efficiently retained in the long-term memory than it is through rote learning (Brown, 2000).

Subjective Norm

Parents of the students and the schools where teachers work were important in teachers' decisions to implement communicative activities. This showed that promoting communicative teaching should not be limited to teachers and students. Efforts should be made to increase awareness of communicative teaching and its principles in the society and specifically among parents. In teacher training, teachers can be challenged to find creative ways to inform parents and school administrators of the advantages of using communicative teaching and solicit support from them.

Perceived Behavioral Control

The qualitative data revealed several barriers for implementation of the communicative activities. These barriers present real problems, and government, teacher training colleges and universities, school administrations, parents of the students, and teachers must work together to find ways to solve them. With effective teacher training, the outcome of English language teaching in China could be different if teachers reconceptualize the following barriers: (a) NCEE, (b) lack of time, and (c) poor skills of the students.

NCEE. Due to the highly competitive nature of the NCEE, students and teachers put all their time and resources into preparing for the test in order to get high scores. Parents and students see entering a university, especially a famous university, as the ultimate goal of secondary education because it guarantees a future job. They believe this is the key to a secure future. MET (the English test of NCEE) only tests students' English skills in grammar,

reading, vocabulary, writing, and listening skills. It does not test students' ability to use the language communicatively. Teachers, students, and parents do not want to invest their limited time into something they cannot use to meet their immediate goal.

However, teaching students to communicate in a language will increase their language skills. Current research indicates that by practicing speaking the language, students are better able to understand and remember the structures as well (Anderson, 1993). Using communicative activities will not hinder students' learning but rather help students understand the language better. Better understanding of the language can in turn help students perform better on tests.

Lack of time. In the follow-up survey, informal conversations, and e-mail exchanges with the participants, the issue of time emerged repeatedly. Teachers reported they had no time to implement the activities due to a heavy work load and limited class time. The participants explained that their main job was to prepare students for all kinds of tests with the ultimate test being the NCEE. Therefore, there was no time left for using communicative activities in the teaching schedule. They viewed the communicative activities as an extra load that should be cut rather than a way to help students learn the language better.

The traditional book-centered, teacher-centered, and test-centered way of language teaching has little or no theoretical basis, and it does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language (Brown, 2000). Putting all the time in the traditional language teaching is not an efficient way of teaching a language. Communicative language teaching has some specific advantages over the traditional way of teaching. Some of them are that (a) it is more likely to produce the four kinds of competence needed in language learning, (b) it is relevant to students' learning, (c) it motivates students to use English in a communicative way, (d) it is less wasteful of time since only the relevant is emphasized, and (e) it equips learners for the real world (Maley, 1984). Using communicative activities is an efficient way of teaching that helps students learn the language effectively. If communicative

activities are used properly, more learning can be achieved in less time.

Poor skills of the students. The participants of the communicative activities workshop liked the activities because they were student centered. However, teachers claimed they did not implement the activities in their teaching because their students did not have the skills to carry out these activities and did not know what to do when put in groups.

Skills to engage in and contribute to group activities do not come naturally and need to be practiced and taught. Students who have been given few opportunities to use the language in a communicative way will naturally find themselves at a loss as to what to do in a group activity. They will face the same awkwardness in real life. An excellent way for students to gain communication skills is to give them opportunities to communicate in classroom settings. The language learning principle of automaticity says that efficient second language learning involves a movement away from controlled, focal processing into a relatively unlimited automatic mode of language processing. Using language in authentic contexts for meaningful purposes will help to build this automaticity (Brown, 2001). Communicative activities are one type of activities that uses language in authentic context; therefore, teachers can use them as a way to move students into automaticity. Without opportunities to use language in authentic context, students can be blocked in their development to fluency.

Communicative Activities

The findings of the study showed that teachers are more likely to implement the communicative activities that are easy to implement and that are relevant to the unique situation in China. Communicative activities that (a) are ready-made, (b) are short and fun, (c) allow teachers to have control, and (e) complement teachers' existing tasks are more likely to be implemented by middle school English teachers.

First, activities should be ready-made. Teachers in China have to cope with many external pressures. They do not have time to look for appropriate

materials such as pictures, stories, video clips, or other teaching aids. In addition, appropriate materials are hard to find in China. It is important that they be given ready-made activities that they can take into the classroom and apply immediately. Second, activities that are short and fun are more likely to be implemented. Teachers in China have a heavy load of teaching tasks, and their main responsibility is to prepare students for all kinds of tests. Both students and teachers are highly stressed by this heavy load. Activities that are short and fun can lighten the atmosphere and relax the students, and these are more likely to be implemented. Even though increasing students' communicative competence may not be teachers' main purpose of using them, these short and fun activities can give students opportunities to use the language communicatively.

Third, activities should allow teachers to have a certain level of control. The class size in China, which ranges from 40 to 60 students, makes it difficult to monitor communicative activities. Students who are not motivated to learn English or have poor skills would fall behind without benefiting from the activities. Teachers in China have a great sense of responsibility for their students; they feel incompetent if they cannot monitor the progress of their students.

Fourth, activities that complement teachers' existing tasks are likely to be implemented. Since teachers in China have to cover a large amount of content in teaching, communicative activities that are closely tied to the materials in the textbooks are more likely to be implemented. Therefore, communicative activities need to be designed based on the teaching tasks of the teachers.

Although participants at the communicative activities workshop rejected the majority of the activities because they were time-consuming, difficult to control, or too easy, teachers should be encouraged to view these seemingly negative elements from a different perspective. Using communicative activities should be viewed as a more effective way to improve communicative competence rather than as supplementary activities. Easy structures do not necessarily mean that students can use them appropriately, and more

emphasis should be placed on application rather than knowledge. Classroom management should also be addressed in order to equip teachers to conduct communicative activities more effectively. When teachers start to look at these aspects of communicative activities from a different perspective and understand the real purpose of using them, they might be more open to communicative activities in spite of difficulties in implementing them. Teachers might not simply avoid the activities but may focus on how to make these activities more manageable and applicable in the classroom.

The Theory of Planned Behavior offers a promising potential to organize trainings for middle school English teachers in China. This can be done by examining the most salient beliefs in the three variables that comprise behavioral intention: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. Teachers should be prepared in both understanding language teaching principles and increasing teaching competences in order to be effective English teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am very grateful to Dr. Gary Conti for his insightful comments and editing efforts on the earlier drafts of this article. I thank Dr. David Connor for his comments on the first draft of the article and the Chinese teachers who participated in the study.

THE AUTHOR

Jiuhan Huang is an assistant professor in the School of Education of Oral Roberts University in the United States. She is the director of the TESL graduate program. Her research interests include communicative language teaching in EFL settings, ESL programs in the US, and professional development for EFL teachers.

REFERENCES

- Ajzen, I. (1985). From intentions to actions: A theory of planned behavior. In J. Kuhl & J. Beckmann (Eds.), *Action-control: From cognition to behavior* (pp. 11-39). Heidelberg: Springer.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179-211.
- Ajzen, I. (2001). Nature and operation of attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 27-58.
- Ajzen, I. (2002). Constructing a TPB questionnaire: Conceptual and methodological considerations. Retrieved in October, 2005 from www.people.umass.edu/ajzen/pdf/tpb.measurement.pdf
- Ajzen, I., & Madden, T. J. (1986). Prediction of goal-directed behavior: attitudes, intentions, and perceived behavioral control. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 22, 453-474.
- Anderson, J. (1993). Is a communicative approach practical for teaching English in China? Pros and cons. *System*, 21(4), 471-480.
- Armitage, C. J., & Conner, M. (2001). Efficacy of the theory of planned behavior: A meta-analytic review. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 40, 471-499.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Crolley, C. (1993). Scanning race. In R. Day (Ed.), *New ways in teaching reading*. Alexandria: TESOL.
- Hadfield, J. (1984). *Elementary communication games*. Essex, England: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Hadfield, J. (1990). *Intermediate communication games*. Essex, England: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Heyer, S. (1994). *The best 10-minute activities*. Workshop presented at TESOL 1994, Baltimore, MD.
- Hird, B. (1995). How communicative can English language teaching be in China? *Prospect*, 10(3), 21-27.
- Houle, C. (1980). *Continuing learning in the profession*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hu, G. (2002). Recent important developments in secondary English-language teaching in the People's Republic of China. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum*, 15(1), 30-49.
- Huang, J. H. (2005) *Understanding intentions of Chinese English teachers to implement communicative activities in teaching*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater.
- Isbell, K. (1993) Weaving the web. In R. Day (Ed.). *New ways in teaching reading*.

Alexandra: TESOL.

- Kennedy, C., & Kennedy, J. (1996). Teacher attitudes and change implementation. *System*, 24(3), 351-360.
- Liao, X. Q. (2000). *Communicative language teaching innovation in China: Difficulties and solutions* (Reports – Research No. 143). ERIC Document No. ED441294.
- Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative language teaching: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maley, A. (1984). On chalk and cheese, babies and bathwater and squared circles: Can traditional and communicative approaches be reconciled? In P. Larson, E. L. Judd, & D. S. Messerschmitt (Eds.), *On TESOL '84. A brave new world for TESOL. Selected Papers from the 18th Annual convention of the TESOL* (pp. 159-169), Houston, Texas.
- Ministry of Education. (2001). *Yiwu Jiaoyu Putong Gaozhong Yingyu Kecheng Biaozhun*. [English Standards for Compulsory Education and Senior Middle Schools]. Beijing: Beijing Teachers College Press.
- Morrow, K. (1981). Principles of communicative methodology. In K. Johnson & K. Morrow (Eds.), *Communication in the classroom: Applications and methods for a communicative approach* (pp. 69-66). London: Longman.
- Nunan, D. (2001). Aspects of task-based syllabus design. Retrieved from <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/syllabusdesign.html>
- Penner, J. (1995). Change and conflict: Introduction of the communicative approach in China. *TESL Canada Journal*, 12(2), 1-17.
- Rao, Z. (2002). Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in EFL classroom. *System*, 30, 85-105.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A description and analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Sun, G., & Cheng, L. (2000). *From context to curriculum: A case study of communicative language teaching in China* (Reports – Evaluative No. 142). ERIC Document No. ED443295.
- Wu, Y. (2001). English language teaching in China: Trends and challenges. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(1), 191-194.
- Yu, L. (2001). Communicative language teaching in China: Progress and resistance. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(1), 194-198.
- Zhang, X. Q. (1997). *The difficulties and challenges of adopting the communicative approach in TEFL at secondary schools in Qinghai Province, China* (Reports – Evaluative No. 142). ERIC Document No. ED413790.