
Teaching and Learning Sociolinguistic Skills in University EFL Classes in Taiwan

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The study reported in the present article was a process-product investigation of foreign language classroom practice and its effects on learners' development of sociolinguistic competence, which, though important for appropriateness of language use, has long been neglected in L2 teaching. Based on classroom observation, the study examined the extent to which college English classes in Taiwan were instructed in this specific aspect of communicative competence and how learners' performance might be linked to the instructions they received. The findings showed that no matter whether a given class was considered more communicatively oriented or less, sociolinguistic instruction was mostly neglected in classroom practice, and that, although the participants had different learning outcomes in speaking and listening skills, they did not differ in sociolinguistic performance.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has become a well-recognized approach in second language (L2) teaching. This approach centers on the widely discussed notion of *communicative competence*. Today CLT has generally been accepted as a norm. As Brown (2001) nicely and humorously puts it, CLT, along with a number of concepts closely allied to it such as *learner-centered*, *whole language based*, *content-centered*, and *cooperative*, has become such a bandwagon term that without the endorsement of it, "teachers cannot be decent human beings and textbooks cannot sell" (p. 46). Compared with approaches that are primarily or even exclusively form-focused and metalinguistic in orientation, the new approach, designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, functional, authentic use of the target language, does a much better job indeed of improving learners' fluency and communicative confidence in the L2 (Lightbown & Spada, 1990). No wonder that questions of how to facilitate the development of all aspects of communicative competence in L2 learners have become an explicit focus in most of the L2 programs.

This article begins by examining the teaching practice of communicative competence and reports on a study of one of its key components—*sociolinguistic competence*. Three main reasons contributed to the rationale for the current study. First, cross-cultural studies have amply shown that the misunderstandings or miscommunication of nonnative speakers often arise from their failure in sociolinguistic competence (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Second, although the teaching for sociolinguistic understanding seems so critical for appropriate use of language that no one would deny the importance of having it integrated with the required L2 study, the sociolinguistic parameter appears to be the most neglected aspect of communicative competence in L2 curricula (Omaggio, 2001). Third, research has amply indicated that L1 culture exerts a great influence on L2 learners' communicative behavior (e.g., Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Given that sociolinguistic competence has been shown to be related closely to speakers' socio-cultural norms (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987), and that great differences exist between Chinese and American rules of speaking (e.g., Yu, 1999), one can reasonably assume that the sociolinguistic behavior of Chinese learners of English may be affected by their native culture and that it therefore differs substantially from that of native speakers of English. Studies have shown that instruction in sociolinguistic competence helps nonnative speakers reduce possible misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996; Kasper, 1997).

Aimed at investigating such classroom practice, the current study examined the instructional practice of sociolinguistic competence based on data collected through classroom observation. A growing body of research has been done in the instructional context of classrooms to explore whether what goes on in language classrooms can add to our knowledge of language learning and use (Nunan, 1992). This line of research, generally referred to as *classroom research*, is usually conducted to investigate the process of teaching (i.e., *process-oriented research*), the learning outcomes (i.e., *product-oriented research*), or the instructional effects on outcomes (i.e., *process-product-oriented research*). Spada (1987) has argued that even though descriptive process-only or prescriptive product-only studies are indispensable and insightful, these studies are of limited value because they leave unanswered the crucial question whether different teaching practices contribute to differences in learning outcomes. However, because process-product research is difficult to carry out (Nunan, 1992), the existing literature has few studies attempting to identify possible links between classroom practice and learning performance. The few studies available have revealed that different instructional practices affect L2 learners' learning outcomes (e.g., Spada, 1987).

The current study fills some gaps in the research literature: First,

although some process-product studies have been done, they generally investigate the development of grammar (morphosyntax). For Chinese learners of American English in Taiwan, very few process-oriented studies have been conducted that aim to understand how sociolinguistic competence is taught in L2 classrooms, let alone a process-product-oriented study. Studies have suggested that many college graduates in Taiwan have very limited communicative competence in English (e.g., Yu, 2006). Fortunately, efforts have been made in college English classes to address this problem, and now the majority of these classes purportedly follow the CLT approach. Sociolinguistic instruction undoubtedly plays a critical role in helping learners reduce the negative transfer from the first language (L1) that arises from the differences between L1 and L2 sociocultural norms. It would thus be of great interest to conduct a process-oriented study to examine how sociolinguistic competence is taught in foreign language classrooms in Taiwan, and a process-product-oriented study to see how the teaching practice may affect learning outcomes.

Second, the Chinese culture of learning may put some serious constraints on the adoption of the CLT approach in language classrooms (Hu, 2002). According to Cortazzi and Jin (1996a), in the Chinese culture of learning, much behavior in the language classroom

is set within taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education. (p. 169)

Language teaching anchored in such a culture lays special emphasis on “memorization” and “understanding and analytical ability” (Connell, 1987, p. 203), rather than “the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes” (Brown, 2001, p. 43), in classrooms where the teacher is usually respected as the source of knowledge and much time is spent on explicating the structure of language and the usage of words (Gao, 2005). Accordingly, it has been argued that CLT and the Chinese culture of learning are in conflict in several important respects (Hu, 2002), and that students may perceive the CLT approach as unsuitable to their needs (e.g., Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Wan, 1997). In this context, it would be intriguing to observe the interaction between Chinese teachers and students in CLT-based classrooms and to examine the teaching effects.

In brief, this study extends the scope of EFL research to the sociolinguistic teaching and learning of an EFL group that is typically considered to have rules of speaking and social conventions very different from those of Westerners. The findings may contribute to a better understand-

ing of how English language teachers can help EFL learners improve their sociolinguistic competence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

This study aimed to examine (a) whether and, if so, how language teachers who interpreted CLT differently would differ in their teaching of sociolinguistic competence, and (b) whether classroom practice had any effect on learners' learning outcomes, especially on the development of sociolinguistic competence.

Participants

The participants in this study came from seven universities in Taiwan. They were 24 Chinese teachers of English teaching intermediate-level freshman English and 732 first-year students from 24 classes taught by these teachers. The freshman English course was compulsory and met 2 hours a week. The aim of the course was to help students meet the English performance goal specified in the school-defined syllabus. Given that both the grammar-translation method and the audiolingual method still play a dominant role in Taiwan's high school foreign language education and are often blamed for students' limited English performance (Yu, 2002), the guiding principles of the syllabi in Taiwan's universities and colleges now emphasize not only grammatical and discourse elements in communication, but also the importance of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. That is, these are eclectic principles that conform to the spirit of the CLT approach.

The selection of the 24 classes was based on a number of measures. First, a teacher questionnaire that focused on teachers' beliefs concerning CLT was used to select the teachers whose teaching reflected CLT's six representative characteristics (Brown, 2001, p. 43). For example, they all believed that classroom goals should be centered on all of the components of communicative competence, and that classroom activities should engage learners in the authentic use of language for meaningful purposes. All the teachers participating were native Chinese speakers who had received college education in Taiwan and held at least a master's degree in a TESOL-related field from a university in an English-speaking country (7 teachers out of 24 held a master's degree, and the

others held a doctoral degree; they had spent from 1 to 8 years abroad). They ranged in teaching experience from 5 to 12 years.

In addition, to ensure that the classes chosen were indeed communicatively based, further steps were taken, such as preliminary classroom observations, discussions with instructors, and a review of teaching materials. Furthermore, when selecting the observed classes, the investigator also tried to match the classes in terms of size, organization, teaching methods, background, and learners' abilities. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), for instance, was administered to serve as a pretest to eliminate the possibility that the classes might not have been at the same level to begin with. Simply put, given that the design of this study was not truly experimental because the sample size was not big enough and because the observed classes were not randomly chosen, attempts were made to improve the study's internal validity. Even so, no claim is made that these classes constitute a representative sample from all college English classes in Taiwan.

Procedures and Instruments

Each of the 24 classes was observed for 2 hours every week, over a 4-month period (one semester) between 2004 and 2006 (approximately 32 hours per class). To answer the research questions, the communicative orientation of language teaching (COLT) scheme (Allen, Fröhlich, & Spada, 1984; Spada & Fröhlich, 1995) was adapted and used in this study because it is one of the most sophisticated observation schemes that have been developed so far (Nunan, 1992) and, more important, because the investigator could match the scheme to the purpose of the present research. All the classes were recorded with the COLT scheme, which consists of two major elements, Part A and Part B. In this study, the coding in Part A was done in class, and the coding in Part B was completed after the observation.

A revised version of Part A was used for real-time coding that described classroom activities at different levels. Part A analyses were both quantitative and qualitative. Where quantitative analyses were concerned, five revised levels were adopted to help determine the degree of communicative orientation of the classes observed: (a) *participant organization*, which focused on the amount of time spent on group work; (b) *focus on meaning*, which measured the extent to which instruction was meaning-based in its orientation; (c) *topic control by students*, which centered on the extent to which students controlled topics in class; (d) *use of extended text*, which refers to the extent to which the materials represented extended discourse; and (e) *use of semi- and nonpedagogic materials*, which specified the extent to which the materials were authentic.

In respect to the instruction of sociolinguistic competence—the primary focus of the current study—the information about code-related instruction, which is subsumed under level (b), provides the needed data. This part of the analysis concerns the extent to which the instructional content in class focused explicitly on form, function, discourse, or sociolinguistic rules, among which sociolinguistics refers to “the features of utterances which make them appropriate to particular social contexts” (Allen et al., 1984, p. 237).

In addition, a qualitative analysis was conducted by examining another level of COLT, *activity type*, which refers to classroom activities such as drill or role play and helped the observer identify the context in which the information of classroom processes realized by all the other levels was provided.

A modified section of Part B was used to conduct a posthoc qualitative analysis of classroom language at the level of verbal interaction. It was hoped that such qualitative information would be crucial for the interpretation of the quantitative data. In this study, Part B analyses served to code both teacher and student talk during classroom activities and thus permitted the observer to investigate the verbal interaction of teacher and student talk to probe how sociolinguistic competence was actually taught and learned in class (see Allen et al., 1984; Spada, 1987; Spada & Fröhlich, 1995, for details regarding the coding procedures of the COLT and the rationale and definition for including different categories).

In brief, Part A analyses in the COLT scheme served as an excellent tool for describing and comparing the communicative orientation of the observed classes, and the subcategory *focus on code* helped to determine the extent to which sociolinguistic competence was taught in different classes. In contrast, Part B analyses were conducted to examine the verbal interaction of teacher and student talk to see how the observed classes were instructed in sociolinguistic competence.

Furthermore, this study used a pre- and postobservation test design. Participants were given the same battery of proficiency tests in the first and the last weeks of classes. Five proficiency measures were used. The measures included a sociolinguistic test and the IELTS. The sociolinguistic test was administered to measure the participants' sociolinguistic performance. It was a custom-designed, 25-item multiple-choice test specially devised to measure the differences in degrees of appropriateness in the spoken mode between Chinese and American English. For each item, a sociocultural context was provided, and the participants needed to choose from a list of four alternatives the most appropriate way to respond to that particular situation. The scoring for this test was based on native-speaker responses to the items (see sample questions in the appendix). Because the test was custom designed, its reliability and validity were checked to reduce the possibility that the absence of observ-

able performance differences might be related to the testing instrument itself. The overall reliability was regarded as high after Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.90$) was calculated; also, the validity was considered satisfactory after 30 college English teachers were interviewed to examine both content and face validity, and correlation and factor analyses were conducted to examine construct validity (Messick, 1996; Yu, 2005).

The other measures came from the IELTS. This test, which has been used as a standard assessment of English-language proficiency worldwide, served as a contrast to obtain information about the participants' overall learning outcomes in terms of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. To reflect better the participants' improvement in L2 proficiency, the four-skill sections of the IELTS were analyzed separately to determine whether learners in some classes improved more on a certain skill than did those in others.

Reliability of Coding

To achieve interrater reliability (Cohen, 1960), 20% of the data for Part A and Part B was randomly selected for independent coding by a second rater. This second rater relied on tape-recorded data to do the coding. A corrected-for-chance level of kappa of at least 0.85 was considered acceptable in the current study. The interrater agreement coefficients were 86% and 91%, respectively, for Part A and Part B.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question—to examine whether and, if so, how teachers who interpret communicative competence differently would differ in their teaching of sociolinguistic competence—we first needed to know whether teachers would differ in interpreting communicative competence in their classroom practice. This study, adapted from Fröhlich et al.'s (1985) classic study, tried to place each observed class on a “communicative continuum” (p. 48) to determine which class was more communicatively oriented; that is, the features frequently mentioned in the literature on CLT were selected and scores then assigned from 1–5, considering the percentage of time spent on each feature. The selected features correspond to the five different levels of Part A in the COLT scheme noted earlier. The scores were anchored in an interval scale so that 0–19, 20–39, 40–59, 60–79, and 80–99% of class time equaled scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. The total score derived from these five features thus could vary from 5–25. An example from Fröhlich et al. explains that an observed class spending “15 percent of

class time on group work, 45 percent on meaning, 10 percent on activities controlled by students, 90 percent on extended text, and 15 percent on non-pedagogic text” (pp. 48–49) would receive a total score of 11 ($1 + 3 + 1 + 5 + 1$) on the communicative continuum. Based on its communicative score, each observed class was classified into one of the three types, *high orientation* (HO; score 5–11), *middle orientation* (MO; score 12–18), and *low orientation* (LO; 19–25). The investigator then further compared the data in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to see whether there were any significant differences in instruction among the three types of classes.¹

Then, to address the first research question, the investigator calculated the average percentage of time each type of class spent on socio-linguistic competence. Again an ANOVA was used to determine whether the teaching of this specific aspect of communicative competence differed between the three types of classes. Further, a qualitative analysis based on Part B was conducted to examine the verbal interaction of classroom talk to see how this competence was taught and learned in class.

To answer the second research question—to determine whether the observed differences in instruction might contribute to variation in learners’ language development—an ANOVA was used to compare the posttest means of the three types of classes. When a significant between-subjects effect was found, a posthoc multiple comparison test was conducted to see how different types of classes differed from one another in their proficiency performance.

RESULTS

Communicative Orientation

In addressing research questions, we first needed to assign each observed class to one of the three class types based on Fröhlich et al.’s (1985) communicative continuum. Table 1 clearly indicates that the 24 classes differed in terms of communicative orientation, with most classes falling into the LO and only two into the HO. The ANOVA showed a

¹ Given that one of the three primary assumptions relevant to ANOVA, randomization, was violated (because the observed classes were not randomly selected), the investigator had carefully checked the distributions of dependent variables and model residuals to see whether the other two key assumptions, normality and homogeneity of variance, were met so that the believability of the statistical findings’s validity could be strengthened. It was found that generally the dependent variable can be considered normally distributed and that the variances of the distributions in the populations are mostly equal.

TABLE 1
Percentage (and Raw Frequencies) of the Number of Classes by Class Type

Communicative orientation			Totals
High	Middle	Low	
8.3 (2)	29.2 (7)	62.5 (15)	100.00 (24)

significant difference in the mean scores on the communicative continuum between the three types of classes ($F = 8.94$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2 shows the results from the five categories of the continuum in COLT Part A for the three types of classes. The instructors in HO classes most often adopted group work, focused on meaning, allowed students to control the topic, and used extended, semi-, and/or nonpedagogical text materials, whereas the instructors in LO classes did so least often, and the instructors in MO classes occupied a place in between.

As indicated earlier, because of this study's methodology, it is unclear to which populations and conditions the results can be generalized. However, given that the existing literature has reported that Chinese teachers of English often hold some concerns about adopting Western approaches (e.g., Gao, 2005; Hu, 2002), the finding that only 2 classes out of the 24 had a high communicative orientation (i.e., HO) may in fact present an accurate picture, at least to some extent. Even so, with only two classes representing that orientation, it is somewhat difficult to see the finding as representative of other classes with the same orientation. The data shown in Table 3 provides a better understanding of the magnitude of these differences between the three types of classes.

A qualitative analysis based on *activity type* can provide another angle to illustrate the differences between the three types of classes. The data collected within this category of COLT Part A were examined to determine whether there were any differences in the kinds of classroom activities and in the way these activities were carried out. It was found that the observed classes differed substantially. With regard to listening com-

TABLE 2
Percentage of Time Spent Focusing on Features of Part A by Class Type

Feature	Communicative orientation		
	High	Middle	Low
Group work	82.6	48.3	50.2
Focus on meaning	65.8	53.7	46.5
Topic control by students	43.5	22.5	9.3
Use of extended text	72.7	49.1	25.4
Use of semi- or nonpedagogic materials	42.9	35.1	12.8

TABLE 3
Percentage of Time Spent on Different Foci of Part A by Class Type

Feature	Communicative orientation		
	High	Middle	Low
<i>Participant Organization*</i>			
Group work	82.6	48.3	50.2
Individual	3.9	9.8	10.3
Group work/Individual	0	8.5	2.7
Whole class	13.5	33.4	36.8
<i>Meaning</i>			
Focus on meaning	65.8	53.7	46.5
Focus on form	29.3	33.5	42.9
Combinations	4.9	12.8	10.6
<i>Student-Controlled Topics</i>			
Student topic control	43.5	22.5	9.3
Teacher-student control**	17.8	34.2	37.9
Teacher topic control	38.7	43.3	52.8
<i>Materials</i>			
Extended text	72.7	49.1	25.4
Minimal text	11.5	23.5	45.2
Audio	0	3.5	6.5
Visual	9.2	14.7	18.1
No materials used	6.6	9.2	4.8
<i>Source of Materials</i>			
Nonpedagogic	14.2***	7.9	5.4
Semipedagogic	28.7	27.2	7.4
Pedagogic	50.5	55.7	82.4

* The different categories that comprise a given feature in this and the following tables are based on Fröhlich et al.'s (1985) framework.

** The teacher selects a topic and then gives the students some freedom in developing the topic. For example, "choose a recent news event that you think needed to be explored but was not."

*** These percentages do not add up to 100 because materials were not used all the time.

prehension training, for example, HO classes most often had authentic activities, that is, tasks simulating real-life communicative situations such as listening to English radio programs. In contrast, MO and LO classes tended to have more activities that reflected traditional pedagogic practices such as multiple-slot substitution drills.

Another example was observed in reading comprehension instruction. The instructors in HO classes tended to conduct textbook lessons with supplementary materials from the real world, such as newspaper or magazine articles. They usually started their classes with some warm-up activities, such as answering questions and filling out a worksheet based on the topic of the article. These activities seemed to aim at rousing learners' interest in the subject matter and at helping them cultivate the ability to anticipate the ideas or vocabulary they might meet in the text. The next step most often involved asking students to read the article, usually individually or in pairs, and then to summarize the main argu-

ments and compare their findings. These activities, presumably intended to deepen students' comprehension, were usually followed by a presentation of the summary by randomly chosen students. Often the summaries were then challenged or improved on by fellow students or the instructor. Obviously, teaching reading this way provided a good opportunity for communicative discussion. The instructors in LO classes, however, provided fewer supplementary materials and tended to focus only on the textbook. In addition, although also starting with some warm-ups such as helping students anticipate the topic, the instructors often lectured. Also, while teaching the text, they generally analyzed it by exhausting every aspect of each passage, rather than practicing the subskills of reading like the instructors in HO classes. Teacher-student interaction was also observed, but it occurred in a somewhat different discussion session in which teachers posed some comprehension questions to check whether students had grasped the precise information they were expected to learn from the reading. In brief, reading lessons were conducted inductively in HO classes; they were conducted deductively in LO classes; and MO classes were generally in between.

In summary, the results centered on the instructional differences in communicative orientation that emerged. Overall, even though the observed classes were indeed communicatively based, they differed in how the CLT approach was interpreted and implemented by different instructors.

Sociolinguistic Instruction

After the differences between the three types of classes had been identified, the investigator examined the amount of class time spent on sociolinguistic competence. Table 4 shows that sociolinguistic competence was seldom taught. The instructors devoted very little time to activities that would help learners improve their sociolinguistic competence (7.4%, 6.2%, and 6.8% of the total observed class time for HO, MO, and LO classes, respectively). The ANOVA indicated no difference.

A closer examination based on Part B, which focused on the communicative features of classroom verbal interaction, provided further information about how each type of class was instructed in this specific aspect

TABLE 4
Total Percentage of Time Spent on Sociolinguistic Competence by Class Type

Feature	High orientation	Middle orientation	Low orientation
Sociolinguistic	7.4	6.2	6.8

of communicative competence. Generally, teachers and students in more communicatively based classes would be expected to focus less often on corrections or other explicit statements that draw attention to linguistic forms, and more often to (a) provide unpredictable information; (b) engage in extended discourse, rather than restrict their utterances to a minimal length of one word, clause, or sentence; and (c) build on addressee responses to develop a topic or engage listeners in further discourse. Students in more communicatively based classes would be expected to initiate talk spontaneously more often and show unrestricted use of the target language (Fröhlich et al., 1985). None of these expectations was borne out in the current study.

In fact, the results revealed a similar pattern of sociolinguistic instruction across all types of class, showing that the very few instances of sociolinguistics-focused instruction observed were always answers to learners' questions or reactions to students' performance or to learner requests for comments on their language use. In other words, teachers rarely took the initiative in presenting information regarding the appropriate use of the target language. Therefore, the sociolinguistic information provided in the classroom was often predictable, and teachers only responded to learners' incorrect use of sociolinguistic forms rather than creating opportunities for their students to incorporate preceding utterances or engage in extended discourse for a better sociolinguistic understanding. Unfortunately, the account of sociolinguistic use by the instructors in different types of classes was also sometimes found to be inadequate or confusing. For example, in group work observed in an LO class, a student started with a compliment on how great a fellow student looked. The complimentee responded by saying, "No, I don't. Don't make fun at me. I know I'm just plain looking." The instructor later commented that such a response might seem odd to Americans because they generally expect a simple "thank you" in the given circumstance, but the teacher then suggested that it might be okay to use a negative, self-denigrating response for Chinese learners of English because L2 learners certainly have the right to retain their distinct cultural traits. It was appropriate and desirable for the instructor to provide alternatives and raise students' awareness of their identity positioning in an intercultural communication situation because the instructor's comment is certainly important in cross-cultural interaction. In other words, the teacher's comment could serve as a good starting point to get students involved in discussing an interesting issue concerning the standard for sociolinguistic competence. However, it was a pity that learners might not be provided with enough opportunities to find out whether a typical Chinese negative response to praise could be considered appropriate in this circumstance, where the speaker used compliments as a conversational opener to establish rapport with the addressee (Wolfson, 1989).

A similar example can be seen in the following excerpt from an English-only HO class in which the teaching material, taken from a Web site by the instructor, was authentic, and the classroom activity, a group-led discussion, was controlled by students.² The material was a short story about how a mother postponed the fulfillment of her promise to her daughter and how she reflected on this behavior of hers (Gordon, 2001).

S1: OK, the mother is certainly unwilling to fulfill her promise to her little daughter. Our group feels sorry for this poor little girl.

S2: Yes, indeed. We can see this poor girl simply won't give up after her mother's refusal in the beginning.

S3: That's right! We're thus interested in the way the mother refuses her daughter's request.

S2: Yes! So, we find this mother-daughter interaction very interesting. We don't think that's typical of Chinese parents. They generally would play a more authoritative role in front of their children. So, er, in other words, we're supposed to listen to our folks in a situation like this.

S1: Right. Take my little sister for example. Even though my mom and she are pretty close, I think she would be asking for trouble if she kept asking my mother the way the little girl does. I guess my mom would think she's not being considerate, or she's simply being a pain in the neck.

S3: Yes, I feel the same way, too. That's why we feel amazed at how nice this mother is. We're wondering whether this is typical of American parents. Moreover, we're wondering when Americans refuse someone, what's their typical behavior? Are they generally nicer than we Chinese are?

.....

S2: Well, after our discussion, we seem to have trouble reaching a consensus. Well, I have a confession to make. In the end, we think maybe we shouldn't have chosen this focus in the first place because we found we chose something we knew little about.

S1: But, as the saying goes, what is done cannot be undone. Maybe we cannot provide a definitive answer for you, but this is some issue that we think is worth second language learners' attention, and we think our teacher can join our presentation to give us a little help here [*indicates the instructor*].

Ss: [*laughter*]

T: Well, this is a complicated issue. Mmm, sometimes American parents or, er, Americans are indeed nicer than we Chinese are when refusing someone's requests, but sometimes they aren't. It actually depends. It's not easy to explain this in a word or two. If you're really interested in knowing more about this, feel free to see me after class. I'll be more than happy to discuss it with you.

² The following excerpt of classroom interaction has been edited for clarity.

SI: So, simply put, can we expect that under the same circumstance when an American or a Chinese refuses our requests, it may be OK to ask Americans one or two times more, but we'd better not ask Chinese again.

Ss: [*laughter*]

T: Well, if you put it that way, I wouldn't have any argument with you.

This extract suggests that maybe because the observed instructor, perhaps due to time or syllabus constraints, could not afford to get into a full discussion in class, the instructor's response might appear confusing in that he or she did not clarify the various underlying issues such as cross-cultural differences in power distance between parent and child. Therefore, although the teacher is considerate to comment, "It actually depends," and offer an after-class discussion for interested students, this teacher, like the instructor in the LO class mentioned earlier, missed a good opportunity for raising students' awareness of the standards for sociolinguistic competence or for teaching the whole class L2 sociolinguistic rules prompted by the students' enthusiastic discussion.

Accordingly, it was concluded that L2 teachers who interpreted the CLT approach differently did not differ in their teaching of sociolinguistic competence.

Instructional Effect

To examine the effect of classroom practice on learners' L2 development, the test scores from the posttreatment tests were summarized in Table 5. The ANOVA results showed that where the four skills were concerned, the type of class was found to account significantly for the differences in improvement on their IELTS listening ($F= 5.02, p < 0.01$) and speaking performance ($F= 21.89, p < 0.001$). Posthoc tests indicated that for these two skills, HO and MO classes improved more than LO classes, and LO classes improved only slightly. However, their performance on the sociolinguistic test did not significantly differ. In fact, the

TABLE 5
Summary of Instructional Effects Based on the Analyses of Variance

Measure	df	Mean squares	F statistic	P value
Listening	2	1.06	5.02	0.0079*
Speaking	2	2.03	21.89	0.0001**
Reading	2	0.40	1.10	0.3302
Writing	2	0.13	1.14	0.2781
Sociolinguistic	2	0.03	0.12	0.7133

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

students in the three types of classes all performed very poorly on the sociolinguistic pre- and posttests; separate *t* test analyses of pre- and posttest scores revealed that none of the students improved significantly over the 4-month session. Based on the very small amount of time spent on sociolinguistic instruction, this result was not unexpected.

DISCUSSION

The study showed that some classes were more communicatively based than the others. Given that CLT is now well-recognized in L2 instruction as an approach rather than as a method, this finding can be expected because teachers need to exercise their own personal philosophy of teaching and learning when implementing it. It thus seems likely that different teachers would not carry out CLT in the same way. Indeed, the results revealed that some classes provided greater opportunity for the negotiation of significant meaning through communicative enrichment materials from the real world; some contained more form-focused, teacher-centered activities; and some occupied a place in between.

Because sociolinguistic competence is a key component in communicative competence, classroom activities oriented toward sociolinguistic competence would be expected to occur more often in HO and MO than in LO classes (Brown, 2001). The study indicated, however, that sociolinguistic instruction was mostly neglected across different types of classes, and that the instructors generally did not differ in their classroom practice when teaching sociolinguistic competence. One possible explanation of this lack may be that the teaching of culture has been long neglected in language learning. Given that sociolinguistic competence is closely related to the sociocultural side of language learning, it was not surprising to observe the overall lack of sociolinguistic instruction. Hence, no matter how much effort a given teacher made to orient his or her class toward communicative skills, this endeavor was seldom directed toward sociocultural learning.

In addition, the study revealed that although different types of classes differ in their learning outcomes for speaking and listening skills, they did not differ in sociolinguistic (or reading and writing) performance. The results showed that the more communicatively based a given class was, the more chances of practicing speaking and listening skills its students appeared to get, so it was reasonable to find that HO and MO classes improved more in these two skills than LO classes, and that LO classes improved only slightly. Spada (1987) reported a similar finding. In fact, this result was expected because one prominent characteristic that makes the CLT approach stand out from the more traditional form-

focused instruction is its emphasis on these two often-neglected, but indispensable skills (Brown, 2001). In contrast, the sociolinguistic finding came as a surprise. Because HO and MO classes, as noted earlier, were expected to have more classroom activities oriented toward sociolinguistic learning, and because classroom teaching has been found to help improve L2 learners' sociolinguistic competence (e.g., Rose & Kasper, 2001), these classes would be expected to have better learning outcomes. The absence of sociolinguistic instruction may account for the unexpected performance.

Because sociolinguistic competence was mostly neglected in classroom practice, an interesting question arises as to whether L2 learners will likely pick up knowledge of this sort without explicit instruction. This study suggests that the answer is no. Research has shown amply that learners often resort to L1 in their L2 sociolinguistic behavior (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Yu, 1999). When L1 and L2 cultural norms are roughly the same, learners may benefit from positive transfer by coincidentally meeting the L2 expectation. In contrast, if L1 and L2 conventions are different, learners have a greater chance of engaging in cross-cultural miscommunication. The Chinese learners of American English in this study performed poorly on the sociolinguistic test because Chinese and American sociocultural rules for speaking are very different and because they received almost no instruction in L2 sociolinguistic competence. As a result, they were so heavily affected by their L1 culture that it interfered with their performance on the test.

Given that these learners' L1 norms often cause negative transfer in their L2 sociolinguistic performance, instruction undoubtedly plays a crucial role in determining whether their use of this competence is successful or unsuccessful. As stated previously, the observed teachers all indicated in the pre-experiment questionnaire that they believed their teaching was anchored in CLT principles, which the results of this study indeed confirmed. It would be of great interest to explore why they left the sociolinguistic element out of their teaching. Because all the observed teachers appeared to be academically well-trained (they all had earned at least a master's degree in an English-speaking country) and because the school's curriculum guidelines had specified the need for teaching students in the appropriate use of a foreign language, it seemed reasonable to assume that these instructors would know that sociolinguistic competence is an indispensable component of communicative competence. If so, there appears to be some discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and their practice.

Research into teachers' beliefs already has shown that although belief-practice congruency is essential for effective teaching, teachers' classroom practice may not always correspond to their beliefs (e.g., Dob-

son & Dobson, 1983; Schon, 1983). Empirical studies have revealed some factors that may cause the discrepancy between language teachers' beliefs and practice (e.g., Chen, 2005; Duffy & Anderson, 1984). For example, Duffy and Anderson studied eight reading teachers and found that only four of them consistently used practice that directly reflected their beliefs. The intervening factors found were the need to follow a prescribed curriculum, a lack of suitable resources, and the students' proficiency level. The current study does not focus on teachers' beliefs, leaving future studies the task of analyzing teachers' beliefs to examine further what role they think sociolinguistic competence should play in CLT. Omaggio (2001) has offered some clues regarding teachers' beliefs that may help account for the fact that culture-related competence often is not treated either as a topic in its own right or as an indispensable aspect of language teaching: (a) teachers may not have enough confidence in their ability to teach this aspect of L2 well; (b) language teachers often think they do not have time for sociocultural teaching in a curriculum already limited by time; (c) sometimes teachers even think that after mastering the basic skills, students will be exposed naturally to sociocultural materials; and (d) sociocultural instruction often involves dealing with students' attitudes, and is thus a sort of hazy, threatening, and unquantifiable area that teachers usually find very challenging when guiding learners to understand and appreciate the logic and meaning of the target culture.

Among these reasons, teachers' confidence is especially worth exploring further because it suggests that teachers' lack of sociolinguistic competence may explain why sociolinguistic teaching was not observed. In fact, research has suggested that many foreign language teachers are not good at this aspect of foreign language knowledge (e.g., Hu, 2002). As for the sporadically observed sociolinguistic instruction in this study, it is interesting to note that the teachers, as mentioned earlier, sometimes conveyed inadequate or even confusing information. Maybe there is nothing unusual about this; studies on teacher talk have shown that teachers' in-class explanations are often unclear and thus simply do not make sense to students (Nunan, 1989). Allwright's (1986) study, for example, indicates that many teachers provide misleading or even incorrect explanations that students find unsatisfactory enough to lead them to ask for a further clarification. He accounts for such teacher talk by suggesting that it probably is unreasonable to expect teachers to offer coherent accounts for points of language when students put them on the spot. However, given that sociolinguistic competence has long been a neglected aspect of foreign language teaching, it would be intriguing to probe whether the observed teachers, because they have had insufficient exposure in their L2 learning experiences, lack the sociolinguistic knowl-

edge with which to make themselves competent instructors in this particular area.

Furthermore, when teacher beliefs are explored, cultural factors may need closer scrutiny. As stated earlier, research has suggested that the Chinese culture of learning may lead the Chinese to perceive CLT as unsuitable to their needs (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Hu, 2002; Wan, 1997). The cultural influence may be particularly important for Chinese teachers of English because, if they indeed feel this way, finding that some important characteristics of the CLT approach are missing in their teaching may not come as a big surprise. This cultural influence may also explain why one teacher was observed to tell his or her students that they could choose a negative, self-denigrating response to a given compliment because it was acceptable to maintain one's own cultural identity.

To complicate matters, another issue closely intertwined with teachers' attitudes and beliefs is the feasibility of teaching sociolinguistic competence. Although today no one would overlook the importance of social, cultural, and pragmatic elements in communication when learning a foreign language, considerable debates have been generated over the feasibility of teaching sociolinguistic competence. Some do not seem to show much confidence in teaching, contending that, if the classroom environment is appropriately structured, learners will develop this kind of competence naturally as they learn (e.g., Holmes & Brown, 1987). Others have maintained that, although universal sociocultural contexts, as well as universal pragmatics, can be expected and perhaps even anticipated to be built into linguistic skill sets, a myriad of unique societal annotations and specifics of culture still exist for L2 learners to acquire (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Hence, it is instructors' responsibility to bridge the usage gap between L1 and L2, and to make learners aware not only of how target language speakers express themselves (i.e., *pragmalinguistic forms*), but also of how these speakers can do it properly (i.e., *sociopragmatic rules*) (Brown, 2000).

The results of this study revealed that without specific instruction, students often poorly learn sociolinguistic skills even in a communicatively based instructional environment. In fact, the existing literature has suggested this result. For example, Lyster (2004) found that students who had spent years in a content-based French immersion program did not know the simple distinction between the formal and informal forms of the *you* pronoun. To date, studies focusing on the efficacy of teaching sociolinguistic competence have been comparatively few, but some researchers have suggested that formal instruction can assist L2 learners in communicating more appropriately and effectively with native speakers of the target language (e.g., House, 1996; Kasper, 1997; Rose & Kasper, 2001). House's study is a good case in point. She found that learners could benefit from both explicit and implicit instruction of L2 sociocul-

tural rules, and that explicit instruction in particular might greatly reduce L1 negative transfer. Also, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) found that students could hardly gain much pragmatic ability without context-embedded instruction. Accordingly, a number of scholars (e.g., Brown, 2000) have advised that the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning be introduced into the classroom.

Moreover, we need to recognize that teaching sociolinguistic competence is by no means a straightforward task. As can be seen from the two examples presented earlier, in reality, it poses a serious challenge to L2 teachers. To help the learner become a more competent foreign language user, instructors certainly need to identify the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 sociolinguistic norms. In addition, instructors cannot assume that simply prescribing to learners what comprises proper behavior in L2 will develop learners' sociolinguistic competence. One reason is the sensitivity required to teach such competence: Sociopragmatic decisions are "social before they are linguistic," and although learners "are fairly amenable to corrections which they regard as linguistic, they are justifiably sensitive about having their social . . . judgment called into question" (Thomas, 1983, p. 104). This sensitivity plays a key role in our understanding of cross-cultural miscommunication. As Olshtain (1993) has suggested, the sensitivity to cultural differences can often help L2 teachers understand why sociolinguistic failure may occur. When aware of these differences, they may "become more open to other ways of speech behavior and, as a result, ensure better communication across cultures, and more tolerance and understanding in interpersonal interactions" (p. 60). This way, teachers can help learners not only avoid lapsing unconsciously into L1 norms and thus perhaps causing offense, but also cultivate tolerance toward cross-cultural differences and foster correct concepts and attitudes in their L2 behavior.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the current study have practical educational implications in L2 learning and teaching. First, L2 learners may need to be specifically taught pragmatic competence in the target culture, to speak grammatically, interpret appropriately what they hear, and interact effectively with members of the target culture. Second, L2 teachers, even though they may follow most principles of communicative language teaching, still may need to incorporate many cross-cultural pragmatic analyses in their teaching to address learners' possible communicative problems (Canale & Swain, 1980). In this way, L2 learners are more

likely to pay attention to the relevant sociocultural factors in their foreign language performance.

It is important to note here that the current study, which was based on data collected through classroom observation, is in essence a posthoc description of some particular classroom events and outcomes. As such, it can be taken only as suggesting directions for future studies. In addition, as Lightbown and Spada (1990) suggest, this kind of data is generally considered limited because we cannot simply assume that the instructional method is the only variable that is related to the observed outcome. Nevertheless, what is observed in class may lead to further research into the question of the specific effects of communicative language teaching on sociolinguistic competence.

It is also important to note that because the design of this study does not allow the investigator to probe what factors may be closely related to the observed behavior, some issues of data interpretation are surely open to future discussion and investigation. Some directions for future studies, as suggested earlier, may be the investigation of why sociolinguistic teaching was left out in a communicatively based curriculum, what teachers' beliefs are about the role sociolinguistic competence should play in CLT, and whether the observed teachers lack sociolinguistic knowledge. Only through more exhaustive studies will researchers be able to present a full picture of L2 learners' opportunities to develop sociolinguistic competence.

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APPENDIX

Sample Questions of the Custom-Designed Sociolinguistic Test

There are 25 situations described in the following pages. *Please note that for all these 25 situations, except you, who are a native speaker of Chinese who can speak American English, all the other persons involved are native speakers of English who cannot speak Chinese. In other words, your addressee in each and every situation below is a native speaker of American English, and you have to use English to interact with him or her.** After reading the description of each specific situation carefully, choose the most appropriate answer you think to each situation—as in a real-life context. Your cooperation is highly appreciated.

* The italicized sentences were also emphasized orally by the investigator before the test began.

1. You are having dinner with your friend's family. The food that your friend's mother has prepared is delicious, and you want some more. You've decided to say something in order to get some more. Which of the following do you think is the most appropriate?
 - A. "You are a great cook."
 - B. "Please give me more food."
 - C. "This food sure is delicious."
 - D. "Could I have some more?"
2. You have given a presentation in the class. After class, you meet with your professor to discuss it, and she says, "Your presentation was great!" Which of the following you think is the most appropriate response to your professor's compliment?
 - A. "Thank you! I'm glad to hear that."
 - B. "No, no, I'm flattered, but I think it's only okay!"
 - C. "I'm embarrassed to hear that."
 - D. "Well, you know, I always try my best not to let you down."