

An Eclectic Integration of the Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching in the Chinese EFL Context

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Abstract: The prevailing paradigm in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) prioritizes learner-centeredness and authentic meaning negotiation. However, implementing pure Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context often conflicts with institutional realities, such as large class sizes and high-stakes examination pressures. Addressing these constraints, this paper proposes a hybrid framework based on systematic Eclecticism. This study advocates for a dual-phase approach that integrates the structural accuracy of the Audiolingual Method (ALM) with the communicative fluency of CLT. In this framework, ALM serves as a structural scaffold to provide lexical and grammatical foundations, thereby preventing cognitive overload and error fossilization. Subsequently, CLT functions as the output mechanism, utilizing micro-tasks and delayed correction to facilitate language production and lower affective filters. This study reconceptualizes learner-centeredness within exam-oriented contexts, offering educators a pragmatic methodology that balances institutional performance metrics with communicative competence.

Keywords: Eclecticism; Audiolingual Method; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Learner-Centeredness; Chinese EFL Context.

1. Introduction

To understand the operational mechanics of any localized language pedagogy, it is essential first to trace the broader pedagogical and historical landscape that shapes classroom realities. This chapter establishes the foundational background of the study, outlines the pedagogical conflicts observed in Chinese classrooms, and presents the core research questions along with the significance of the proposed eclectic approach.

1.1. The Evolution of Second Language Acquisition Paradigms

For over a century, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has sought effective methodologies to facilitate foreign language proficiency. Early paradigms, dominated by the Grammar-Translation Method, treated language as an academic exercise, often leaving learners with metalinguistic knowledge but limited spoken competence. As globalization increased the demand for oral communication, the mid-20th century saw the rise of structuralist approaches, notably the Audiolingual Method (ALM). ALM attempted to systematize language learning through mechanical habit formation under strict teacher control[1].

However, the late 20th century brought a significant cognitive and social shift. Language came to be viewed not as static habits, but as a dynamic tool for social interaction[2]. This shift gave rise to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which prioritized “communicative competence”. Alongside this methodological evolution, educational philosophy shifted toward learner-centeredness. Modern language pedagogy emphasizes that effective learning cannot occur when students are merely passive, reactive recipients of linguistic stimuli[1]. Instead, effective instruction must prioritize the learners’ subjective needs, cognitive autonomy,

and emotional well-being, transforming the classroom into an interactive space where students are empowered to actively construct meaning.

1.2. The Dilemma of the Chinese EFL Classroom

While the theoretical benefits of communicative approaches are widely accepted, their implementation in the Chinese EFL context faces unique challenges. Educators operate under complex institutional constraints, conceptualized here as instructional “knots”[3].

First and foremost are the Examination Knots (E-knots). The Chinese educational system relies heavily on high-stakes assessments such as the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and the High School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao) which prioritize grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension. Since teacher and student evaluations are largely based on these scores, there is systemic pressure to prioritize accuracy over the open-ended fluency emphasized by CLT. This “washback effect” creates a direct conflict between exam preparation and communicative goals[4].

Secondly, teachers must contend with Reality Knots (R-knots). The vast majority of Chinese EFL classrooms are large-scale environments, frequently containing 40 to 60 students per class. Maintaining meaningful peer interactions under such a crowded classroom ecology often leads to systemic management breakdown and passive student isolation[5]. In such settings, organizing unconstrained communicative activities often results in logistical difficulties, classroom management failures, or uneven student participation where highly proficient students dominate while lower-proficiency learners disengage. Furthermore, because English is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language, students lack a natural linguistic environment outside the classroom to reinforce what they

learn, making purely organic acquisition exceptionally difficult. Moreover, modern adjustments remind us that local instruction must fundamentally serve the objective historical needs of the country's development rather than blindly imitating Western models[6].

1.3. Research Question and Significance

The constraints of the Chinese EFL context suggest that a rigid adherence to a single methodology is impractical. Exclusive reliance on ALM creates a highly controlled environment that may inhibit student autonomy and communicative development[7]. Conversely, implementing CLT without structural support in large classes often leads to cognitive overload and error fossilization[8].

Therefore, this study addresses the following question: How can EFL teachers design a framework that balances structural accuracy with communicative fluency, satisfying institutional requirements while upholding learner-centered principles?

The significance of this study lies in its rejection of methodological rigidity. By proposing a framework of Eclecticism, this paper moves beyond the historical “methods debate” to offer a localized solution. It provides a blueprint where the structural strengths of ALM are synthesized with the interactive nature of CLT, treating accuracy and fluency as complementary phases of instruction[9].

2. Theoretical Contrast

Constructing a coherent eclectic methodology that balances linguistic precision with communicative spontaneity necessitates a critical examination of the theoretical underpinnings of both the Audiolingual Method (ALM) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). These methodologies diverge not merely in classroom techniques but represent fundamentally distinct ontological and epistemological stances regarding the nature of language, psychological acquisition, and pedagogical power dynamics. By elucidating these foundational contrasts, this chapter establishes the theoretical rationale for a synthesized approach tailored to the localized EFL context.

2.1. The Audiolingual Method (ALM)

Rooted in structural linguistics and behavioral psychology, the Audiolingual Method (ALM) conceptualizes language acquisition as a process of habit formation through response conditioning. To understand its role within the proposed eclectic framework, its core principles will be examined across three dimensions: its linguistic foundations, its traditional classroom configurations, and its strict philosophical orientation toward error correction.

2.1.1. Theoretical Foundations and the Nature of Language

The Audiolingual Method emerged during World War II, driven by the need for rapid oral proficiency. Its psychological basis is rooted in Skinner's radical behaviorism, which conceptualizes language acquisition not as an innate cognitive faculty, but as a process of habit

formation. According to this view, learning is governed by a stimulus-response-reinforcement chain[10]. A linguistic stimulus from the teacher elicits a response from the learner; if correct, positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of habit formation.

Linguistically, ALM relies on structuralism, viewing language as a system of structural patterns and syntactic units[11]. In this paradigm, speech is prioritized over writing, and mastery entails the automatic manipulation of structural frames without conscious grammatical analysis.

2.1.2. Classroom Dynamics and Instructional Roles

In an ALM classroom, pedagogical authority is centralized, creating a teacher-dominated environment. The instructor acts as the primary source of linguistic input and the director of classroom activities, modeling target structures and monitoring student production[11].

Conversely, students assume a reactive role. They are not encouraged to initiate spontaneous interaction but rather to respond to stimuli. Typical activities include choral repetition, where the class repeats a pattern in unison to build automaticity, and substitution drills, where students insert cue words into a syntactic frame. Transformation drills are also used to require students to alter sentence structures such as automatically changing an affirmative statement into a negative or interrogative one. These strategies aim to ensure accurate and uniform performance under teacher supervision.

2.1.3. The “Zero-Tolerance” Error View

Given its behaviorist foundation, ALM maintains a strict zero-tolerance policy toward errors. Errors are viewed not merely as mistakes, but as potential sources of negative habit formation that hinder the acquisition of target language structures[11]. Consequently, immediate correction is prioritized to prevent the fossilization of errors. This “avoid errors at all costs” philosophy places psychological pressure on learners. Since spontaneous speech involves trial and error, restrictive nature of ALM may inhibit students from taking communicative risks, potentially leading to language anxiety in a highly controlled environment.

2.2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

In contrast to the structural paradigm, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) shifts the focus of SLA from structural correctness to communicative competence. To understand its role in the proposed eclectic framework, it is essential to analyze its underlying cognitive philosophy and its manifestation in classroom dynamics and error treatment.

2.2.1. Theoretical Foundations and Communicative Competence

In contrast to the structural paradigm, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) shifts the focus of SLA from structural correctness to social adequacy. This shift was catalyzed by Chomsky's critique of behaviorism and Hymes' introduction of Communicative Competence[12]. Hymes argued that linguistic knowledge must include the social rules of language use—knowing “when, where, and to whom” to speak. Canale and Swain later operationalized this into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence[2].

Psychologically, CLT is anchored in social constructivism. Rather than viewing learning as mechanical repetition, this theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through authentic interaction. Language acquisition is seen as a byproduct of communication; individuals “learn to use a language” by “using a language to learn”.

2.2.2. Classroom Dynamics and Learner Empowerment

CLT reconfigures traditional classroom dynamics by establishing a learner-centered environment. Students are transformed from passive listeners into active negotiators of meaning. The teacher’s role shifts from an authoritative controller to a facilitator and resource provider.

Instructional activities in CLT are characterized by open-endedness and the use of Information Gaps, where participants must communicate to exchange missing information[11]. Through role-plays and problem-solving tasks, students practice functional language use, ensuring that the target language serves as a medium of communication rather than an object of study.

2.2.3. The “Trial-and-Error” Error View

Distinct from ALM, CLT adopts a permissive attitude toward linguistic deviation. Errors are viewed as natural evidence of the learning process and interlanguage development[6]. In a communicative environment, fluency is prioritized over accuracy. Unless an error causes a complete breakdown in communication, the teacher typically tolerates it to maintain the student's communicative flow and protect their self-esteem. This approach aims to lower the affective filter and encourage risk-taking.

2.3. The Necessity of Eclecticism

When applied rigidly in the Chinese EFL context, both pure ALM and pure CLT present significant limitations. Exclusive reliance on ALM may lead to high structural accuracy but often results in an inability to generate spontaneous speech—the ‘Mute English’ phenomenon. Conversely, implementing pure CLT without structural scaffolding in large classes can lead to cognitive overload. Students lacking a linguistic foundation may struggle to engage in open-ended discussion, potentially resulting in silence or the fossilization of errors.

Rigid adherence to a single methodology is often counterproductive. Recent research emphasizes analyzing local classroom environments from an ecological perspective, acknowledging that large-class interactions face structural limits that cannot be solved by idealistic communicative models alone[5]. Therefore, modern EFL instruction requires a strategic integration of form-focused drills and meaning-focused negotiation[9]. To resolve this polarization, this paper advocates for Eclecticism, which synthesizes these approaches[13]. By integrating ALM and CLT, an eclectic framework treats accuracy and fluency as sequential, symbiotic phases. Teachers can use ALM to build a structural scaffold, then deploy CLT tasks to transform static knowledge into communicative competence.

3. The “Dual-track” Eclectic framework

Bridging the gap between theoretical eclecticism and practical application requires a structured pedagogical blueprint. To translate the proposed synthesis of ALM and CLT into actionable classroom procedures, this chapter establishes a “Dual-track” Framework. The following sections detail the implementation strategies, moving from the Structural Scaffolding Phase (Input) to the Communicative Activation Phase (Output), and finally integrating them through a Dual-Track Error Management System.

3.1. Structural Scaffolding Phase (The ALM Input Track)

In designing a localized classroom framework for Chinese EFL learners, the first track of the proposed framework focuses on establishing a solid structural foundation through explicit, form-focused instruction and systematic drilling. This Structural Scaffolding Phase strategically deploys core Audiolingual Method (ALM) techniques. It is premised on the understanding that students cannot spontaneously negotiate meaning without the baseline linguistic architecture to formulate basic propositions.

In my future classroom, a new unit or grammar point will always initiate with a structural input track. For example, when teaching Unit 4 “Why don’t you talk to your parents?” from the PEP Grade 8 textbook, the teacher focuses on the target structure for giving advice: “Why don’t you + V...?” or “You should + V...” [14]. Rather than relying on tedious, long-winded metalinguistic explanations, the teacher initiates fast-paced, highly structured substitution drills. The teacher provides clear problem prompts like “I have too much homework”, and the entire class responds in unison with the target structure: “Why don’t you talk to your teacher?”. This choral repetition automates the syntactic frame, preparing students for the subsequent communicative phase.

This choral repetition serves a dual purpose: it automates the syntactic frame and builds immediate structural confidence. By removing the spotlight from individual students, it effectively lowers the affective filter. This tactical integration aims to bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and communicative performance, a phenomenon often termed “the separation of learning and using”[8]. By providing this initial lexical and grammatical framework, students are protected from the cognitive overload that typically occurs when they are thrust into an open-ended communicative environment without adequate preparation[3].

3.2. Communicative Activation Phase (The CLT Output Track)

Following the structural drilling, the classroom transitions to the second track: the Communicative Activation Phase. Governed by the tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), this stage creates a learner-centered environment where students become active negotiators of meaning.

To facilitate authentic communication in a large-class setting, structured Information Gap tasks and pair-work activities are systematically implemented. For example, based on FLTRP Compulsory Book 2 Unit 6 “Earth First”, students engage in a role-play task titled “The Town Hall Meeting”[15]. Student A acts as a factory manager needing to expand production, while Student B acts as a local environmentalist. Crucially, each student holds confidential information that the other lacks. To reach a consensus, they must negotiate using target language functions for expressing concern and proposing solutions. The genuine information gap and conflict of interest prevent students from simply reading a script; they must actively listen and negotiate. This process transforms static grammatical knowledge into a functional skill, achieving learner empowerment by placing the responsibility for meaning construction on the students.

3.3. The Dual-Track Error Management System

A key feature of this eclectic approach is the Dual-Track Error Management System, which synthesizes the contrasting error-correction philosophies of ALM and CLT according to the lesson phase. The system operates dynamically, moving from a focus on accuracy to one on fluency, and concluding with collective cognitive synthesis. Below are the three steps of the Dual-Track Error Management System.

Table 1. Framework of the Dual-Track Error Management System

Dual-track Error Management System	
Phase 1: Structural Scaffolding	Focus: Accuracy; Habit Formation Method: Immediate, Direct Correction Goal: Form Precision; Eliminate Flaws
Phase 2: Communicative Activation	Focus: Fluency; Spontaneity Method: Unobtrusive Recording Goal: Protect Flow; Reduce Stress
Post-activity: Delayed correction	1. Address common syntactic issues anonymously 2. Co-construct correct forms on the board

During the Structural Scaffolding Phase, the teacher operates in Accuracy Mode, employing the direct, immediate correction strategies characteristic of ALM. If a student makes an error during a drill, the teacher immediately models the correct form to prevent the fossilization of inaccurate linguistic habits.

Conversely, when the class transitions to the Communicative Activation Phase, the teacher switches to Fluency Mode. The primary goal here is to maintain communicative flow and protect the student's affective filter. The teacher adopts the role of an unobtrusive observer, noting errors in an observation notebook rather

than interrupting. Immediate correction during this phase can disrupt communicative flow and trigger performance anxiety, undermining the safe environment necessary for acquisition[7]. Research in positive psychology further highlights that managing classroom emotions is critical for sustaining motivation[16][17].

Therefore, Delayed Correction is practiced. After the task, the teacher writes collected, anonymized errors on the board, inviting the class to collaboratively identify and correct them. This system balances the institutional demand for accuracy with the need to protect the learner's communicative autonomy.

4. Pedagogical Reflections and Limitations

Implementing the dual-track framework requires not only technical adjustments but also a shift in evaluating success within an exam-oriented context. This chapter redefines learner-centeredness, examines how an eclectic pedagogy addresses structural pressures restricting instructional innovation, and acknowledges the study's limitations.

4.1. Pedagogical Reflections

The following reflections address three interconnected dimensions of the framework's pedagogical impact: the reconceptualization of learner-centeredness, the resolution of systemic institutional constraints, and the cultivation of metacognitive learner agency.

4.1.1. Redefining Learner-Centeredness in Exam-Oriented Contexts

To implement an effective localized pedagogy, educators must critically redefine “learner-centeredness” within the pragmatic constraints of an exam-oriented culture. In Western discourse, learner-centeredness is often associated with absolute student autonomy and minimal teacher control [11]. However, introducing such an unstructured approach into large-scale Chinese classrooms preparing for high-stakes examinations may hinder students' academic progress.

A localized approach must balance two dimensions of learner needs: objective and subjective. Objective needs are dictated by institutional realities, specifically the mastery of grammatical knowledge and syntax required for competitive national examinations. Neglecting structural feedback overlooks this prerequisite for future advancement. Concurrently, subjective needs encompass the psychological desire to express personal identities, collaborate with peers, and acquire language in a low-anxiety environment.

The proposed integration of ALM and CLT offers a holistic solution. Rather than prioritizing form over meaning, the framework meets objective academic expectations through structured ALM drills while addressing subjective communicative needs through CLT micro-tasks. Thus, learner-centeredness is realized through a balanced design that respects both students' academic goals and their personal development.

4.1.2. Addressing Institutional Constraints through Structural Scaffolding

Language educators in China often face professional anxieties stemming from “Examination Knots” (E-knots) and “Reality Knots” (R-knots). The dual-track framework serves as a practical tool to address these systemic constraints. It mitigates the E-knot by demonstrating that communicative output is a cognitive extension of structural learning. Students who actively apply grammatical structures in communicative tasks achieve a deeper cognitive grasp than those who merely memorize them passively, ultimately improving performance in both summative exams and oral assessments.

Furthermore, the framework alleviates the R-knot by replacing unstructured whole-class discussions with highly scaffolded pair-work micro-tasks. Since these tasks are supported by the preceding ALM phase, classroom management remains predictable, avoiding the challenges typical of unguided communication in large classes. Consequently, this approach enables teachers to introduce meaningful communicative practices while maintaining compliance with institutional performance metrics.

4.1.3. Cultivating Learner Agency through Metacognitive Awareness

The success of this pedagogy depends not only on teacher implementation but also on student engagement. A significant barrier in Chinese EFL contexts is students’ cognitive dissonance. They often perceive structural drills as “real learning” and communicative tasks as recreational, or vice versa. The dual-track framework bridges this gap by fostering meta-cognitive awareness.

By explicitly distinguishing between Accuracy Mode and Fluency Mode, teachers clarify the instructional rationale. When learners understand that the ALM phase equips them with the linguistic resources necessary for subsequent CLT tasks, their resistance to mechanical practice diminishes. They begin to view grammar as a functional toolkit for social interaction rather than abstract rules for testing. This transparency transforms students from passive recipients into active participants. Over time, this structured alternation helps students develop self-regulated learning strategies, enabling them to balance precision and fluency autonomously—a critical competency for lifelong language development.

4.2. Limitations of the Study

While this paper proposes a robust theoretical framework, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the proposed dual-track model is deeply rooted in the Chinese exam-oriented educational ecology, and its applicability to other EFL contexts with different assessment cultures or class size constraints remains to be verified.

Second, as this study is primarily conceptual and reflective, it lacks longitudinal empirical data, such as pre- and post-test scores, classroom observation transcripts, or student interview data, to quantitatively validate the effectiveness of the framework on actual language acquisition outcomes.

Finally, the successful implementation of this eclectic approach places high cognitive and pedagogical demands

on teachers, yet the study does not fully address the potential challenges they may face in mastering the rapid switching between ALM and CLT modes without extensive professional development.

5. Conclusion

SLA has often been shaped by ideological divides, pitting high-stakes testing against idealized Western models. This paper argues that ALM and CLT are not outdated opposites, but complementary dimensions of a balanced toolkit. By adopting an eclectic stance, teachers can use ALM drills to build a stable linguistic foundation, then shift to CLT micro-tasks that transform this knowledge into communicative competence. This dual-track approach makes learner-centeredness both localized and culturally responsive, addressing the academic and emotional needs of Chinese learners.

To validate this framework, future research should proceed in four directions. First, empirical action research is needed to measure the approach’s impact on both test scores and oral proficiency. Second, teacher cognition studies should explore how educators adapt to the model and what training helps overcome “pedagogical helplessness”. Third, student perspectives can offer deeper insight into meta-cognitive development and emotional responses. Finally, cross-cultural adaptation studies will test the framework’s flexibility in educational contexts beyond China.

Ultimately, language teaching is context-dependent and dynamic. Combined with my own understanding of second language learning, I believe that excellent language teaching requires flexible and eclectic pedagogy. Synthesizing the strengths of diverse teaching methods to fit local classroom needs is the core of effective EFL teaching, and also the future direction of second language teaching practice.

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