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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Peoples' Republic of China in the early 1990s, the difficulties teachers encountered in implementing this change of approach, and efforts to overcome these difficulties. Secondary teachers had considerable difficulty in implementing CLT mainly, because they lacked sufficient knowledge of English and of teaching methods to make such a radical change without further guidance and training. (Contains 20 references.) (KFT)

Communicative Language Teaching Innovation
in China: Difficulties and Solutions

Xiao Qing Liao

In the early1990s, China saw its movement towards communicative language teaching (CLT). In 1992 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) introduced a new English Teaching Syllabus, which states that the aim of teaching English is to develop the students' communicative competence. In the same year, in cooperation with the British Longman, the SEDC published the new textbook series - *Junior English for China (Books I, II and III)* (Grant & Li, 1992) which was designed for the development of communicative competence. All these were to call for an innovation from the traditional teaching into communicative language teaching. This essay will describe the teaching situation and CLT adoption, and difficulties that teachers encountered and the efforts to overcome the difficulties.

1. CLT Innovation

"Curricular innovation is a managed process of development whose principal products are teaching (and/or testing), materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters" (Markee, 1997, p. 46). Innovation is a process of deliberate alteration – intention is a crucial element (ibid. p. 114). The purpose of innovation is to bring about improvement in relation to desired objectives of language curricular. Language curricular innovation involves many aspects, which includes the introduction of a new textbook, changes in forms and procedures of assessments, the substitution of new methods for old, the provision of new equipment (e.g. video recorders, computers) are all aspects of curriculum innovation (White, 1988, p.113).

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CLT is an innovation in language teaching methodology. It was innovative because it broke with previous practice in that it was based on a systematic behavioral analysis of learners' pragmatic language learning needs and based on a learner-centered, communicative-oriented approach to language instruction (Markee, 1997, p. 16). Richards and Rodgers (1986, p. 71) summarize some of the characteristics of communicative view of language:

1) Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2) The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
3) The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative use.
4) The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

In classroom teaching, CLT has some features which are in the opposition of the traditional teaching method. Firstly, CLT sets the communicative competence as its desired goal and holds that language should be learned through use and through communication. Based on this notion, the teacher usually creates real life situations in classes and has students to play roles, simulations true-to-life interactions, and other communicative activities. Students learn to use language appropriately in different types of situations to perform different kinds of tasks for social interaction with other people. Thus, language can be learned as it is actually used in real communication.

Secondly, CLT insists that interactional speaking activities in classrooms be instances of real communication, based on a genuine information gap. Communication takes place when the receiver doesn't already know the information in the sender's message. In other words, there is an information gap, which is filled by the message. In classrooms, the gap exists when the teacher/student in an exchange knows something that the other student does not. If students know today is Monday and the teacher asks, "What day is today?" then the exchange is not really communicative.

Thirdly, CLT stresses two-way communication. When communicating in real life, people do not say to themselves, nor monologize as in a drama play, but always exchange the information with others. In the classroom, therefore, the teacher usually brings students' initiative into full play, limits teacher-talking time and prevents the cramming method in order to let students practice more. Thus students become active agents communicating throughout the classes rather than passive recipients of language knowledge.

Fourthly, CLT ensures that students have sufficient exposure to the target language. This exposure provides opportunities for language acquisition to occur. Students are encouraged to create and internalize language; they are not asked to learn by memorizing grammar rules and vocabularies. In this way, students' communicative competence can be developed as they try to deal with a variety of language situations.

Finally, CLT embraces all the four language skills. By integrating listening, speaking, reading and writing, students can not only develop these skills but also constantly combine them in use as people use them in real life situations.

2. Introduction of CLT in China

CLT was introduced as a problem-solving instrument into secondary schools in China in the early 1990s. The problem was the inability of students' use of language for communication. Before the new functional syllabus was introduced in 1992, the structural syllabus that set language knowledge as the main teaching aim was still in effect. Under the guideline, teachers tended to use the structural method. "87% of teachers in China's middle schools used the traditional method in the late 1980s" (Zuo, 1990, p. 40). In teaching practice, teachers always tended to over-emphasize the importance of grammar and overlook the communicative use of language. Nearly every lesson followed the three unchanged teaching procedures with focus on grammatical study rather than language use:

Presentation of the text to exemplify the grammatical and lexical items, with Chinese as the chief medium of instruction

➔ Drills on these linguistic items

➔ Presentation and consolidation of grammar through illustrative sentences and specially designed exercises.

As a result of this teaching method, the teaching result is that "the students' ability to use English was much lower than that of knowledge" (ibid. p. 42). Students became almost "deaf and dumb" who had little ability to speak and understand English (Ng & Tang, 1997).

This led SEDC to re-evaluate the traditional method and came to realize that teaching language involves communicative competence. The true mastery of a language involves communicative competence. Some teachers proposed that communication aim be considered as another dimension in the national unified syllabus. Therefore, in the functional syllabus the "communication aim" was stated, which is "by training in listening, speaking, reading and writing, to teach students in order to gain basic knowledge of English and competence to use English for communication." (*English Teaching Syllabus*, 1992). Clearly, this aim includes teaching of the four language skills for communication. Students were required to have the following knowledge:

1) knowledge of the basic principles of appropriateness and an ability to apply such principles in real communication,

2) knowledge of rules of speaking (e.g. knowing how to begin and end conversations, knowing what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations),

3) knowledge of the basic strategies for using and responding to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks and invitations.

(Ibid. 1992)

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3. Difficulties that Limit the Application of CLT

Because CLT innovation involves a change from old to new, it is fraught with difficulties from the beginning. CLT is constrained by difficulties which limit a wholehearted application of CLT to the Chinese context. These difficulties are related to the approach itself as well as the past teaching traditions and present situations of English language teaching and learning in China. They include the teachers' lack of language proficiency and culture knowledge, no familiarity with the new method, and the negative influence of Chinese educational traditions on teachers.

Teachers' Inability to Teach Communicatively

CLT requires a better teacher. Attempts to teach English communicatively in classrooms would demand of the teacher an extraordinary level of expertise, together with sustained energy and education. Medgyes (1986) states:

> The communicative classroom requires a teacher of extraordinary abilities: a multi-dimensional, high-tech, Wizard-of-Oz-like super-person – yet of flesh and blood. He or she must be confident without being conceited, judicious without being judgmental, ingenious without being unbridled, technically skilled without being pedantic, far-sighted without being far-fetched, down-to-earth without being earth-bound, inquiring without being inquisitive – the list is endless.

It is even more difficult for non-native speakers of English to practice CLT completely and accurately. CLT thrusts a heavy burden on the shoulders of non-native-speaking teachers just as Medgyes states:

> A great proportion of the energy of non-native-speaking teachers is inevitably used up in the constant struggle with their own language deficiencies, leaving only a small fraction for attending to their students' problems. By putting an

especially heavy linguistic strain to the teacher, the communicative approach further reduces the time non-native teachers have available for their students.

(Medgyes, 1986)

Chinese teachers are non-native speakers of English. Most of them, especially those in rural schools lack enough ability to speak English in the class. Their low level of teacher education and language learning may reflect this deficiency. According to the SEDC investigation, in the late 1980s, the percentage of middle school teachers with BA degrees is only 28%, 12% of which were Russian majors and 8% of them were graduated with a 3-year BA program during the Cultural Revolution. Teachers with associate degrees and with secondary school diplomas were 4% and 29% respectively (Zuo, 1990, p.34).

In addition to language proficiency, a communicative teacher also needs a good knowledge of the target culture (the type of knowledge focus on the appropriate use of language in context). CLT recognizes that language and culture are closely related and strives to develop students' cultural knowledge along with their ability to use language for real communication. To accomplish this, teachers have to master a high level of the target culture knowledge. However, most Chinese teachers had little cultural knowledge. Campbell and Zhao (1996) state that inability to change to CLT is the result of many factors, one of which is the teachers' limited knowledge of the target culture. Owing to a lack of English proficiency and culture knowledge, Chinese teachers are not able to teach the target culture. Moreover, they are concerned about not being able to answer spontaneous questions about the target language or culture as they arise from interactions in the classroom. This led the teachers into inappropriate way of teaching.

As to the teaching methods, not many teachers are familiar with the new teaching methodology. They are used to the traditional method and it was hard for most of them to adapt themselves to radical changes. As Li states (1998), some teachers may be reluctant to try CLT as it forgoes much of the familiar and requires something different.

Negative Influence from the Teaching Traditions

Chinese educational traditions had a negative influence on teachers. CLT advocates special, less direct classroom roles for teachers. Teachers should be more of a facilitator, advisor, observer, and co-communicator (e.g. Richards & Rodgers, 1986, Larshen-Freeman, 1983). However, the traditional relationship between Chinese teachers and students in the classroom is that of knowledge giver and receiver. If teachers do not display their knowledge in classes, or if they play games with students or ask students to play roles, then they are criticized as unqualified teachers. On the other hand, students hoped that they could learn lots of knowledge from teachers by taking notes and by remembering the knowledge. Jones' empirical study (1995) reveals that Chinese students expected a responsible teacher to assume the more direct roles of experts, director, model, and evaluator. Some students complained that some (foreign) teachers don't know how to teach. They don't teach what Chinese students need. They just waste time by messing around. The students tend to associate games and other communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are skeptical of their value as learning tools.

In addition, CLT encourages practice of language use by pair and group work so that students have chances to express themselves. However, China has a Confucian culture, which seeks compromise between people. When it is applied to language classrooms, it is obvious that students were not willing to express their opinions for fear of losing face or offending others. Thus pair or group work might not suit the students. The teaching thus returned to the traditional way of individual essay writing (Leng, 1997). As Rao (1996) states:

> The outcome of teaching English exclusively using the communicative approach did not provide the expected results. The students judged the methods ridiculous and inappropriate. They refused to sit in a circle and speak English to each other. They did not like inventing conversations or playing communicative games. They insisted on attending lectures on intensive reading and grammar and on taking

conventional exams...Students have not responded favorably to the communicative approach, compelling teachers to revert to the grammar-translation method.

Grammar-Oriented Examination Pressure

The highly centralized, national examination system is a powerful impediment to change in educational innovation. The national Matriculation English Test (MET) is one of the National College Entrance Exams developed by the SEDC. Passing it to enter colleges and universities for further education is the most important consideration for secondary students while learning English. "The test has been identified as the single most powerful influence in the resistance to innovation in educational practice in China" (Hird, 1995).

It is clear that the test had a significant influence on English teaching and any move towards CLT must judged in the light of how well the students are successful in the test. Ng and Tang (1997) stated that "the teachers see their primary goal in teaching as to prepare students for public examinations." To prepare students for these examinations, teachers have to follow strictly the schedule prescribed by the school, leaving no room for adjustment to suit different abilities in the skills developing process, and no time for conducting language activities in class.

As a result of these difficulties, "many teachers have tried to change the dominant teaching procedures but quickly get frustrated, lose their initial enthusiasm, and acquiesce to tradition"(Campbell & Zhao, 1993). Therefore, CLT did not gain popularity in the early 1990s. Hird (1995) states that the English language teaching in China is "not very communicative. And maybe that is just as well, because China is a vastly different English language teaching environment from the one that spawned and nurtured the communicative approach." The teachers believe that it is not feasible to adopt CLT because their country has its special characteristics.

4. Overcoming the Obstacles

Teacher Training

Among the various difficulties, the teachers' teaching inability was the one most related to classroom teaching effectiveness. It is considered as internal and primary condition while the teaching traditions and examination washback were external constraints. If teachers have understood CLT principles and advantages of CLT, they will have a positive attitude towards CLT, know how to use CLT, and be motivated to overcome difficulties. So the important thing the educational authorities did was the teacher training. "Many teachers should have in-service training which may be in secondary normal schools, normal colleges, teachers' colleges and normal universities" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). As a result, "the in-service courses are increasingly available in universities and colleges as the need for systematic training in current methodologies is widely recognized"(ibid.).

One type of teacher training was taking an in-service teacher course, lasting from several days to one or two years. The teachers studied part-time or full time or in a distant learning mode. Some teachers also entered teacher colleges or normal universities for degrees in language teaching and learning.

In the teacher-training course they learn the knowledge and skills necessary for successful classroom teaching which include the following. Firstly, teachers learn English knowledge in order to raise the level of English proficiency in the four language skills, especially in speaking and listening skills.

Secondly, teachers learn to understand the guidelines on how to teaching communicatively which are provided by the new syllabus:

- Teaching should start with listening and speaking
- Drills on language form should not be excessive

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- English should be used in class

- Use of translation should be limited

- Audio-visual aids like realia, pictures, over-head transparencies, audio-tapes, videos, computers should be fully utilized

- The teacher's role should be a facilitator and helper to guide students to develop effective learning habits

- Teachers should be aware of the individual differences among students in the learning process

- Appropriate encouragement should be given to students to reinforce their initiatives.

<div align="right">(English Teaching Syllabus, 1992)</div>

Thirdly, they also learn the target culture knowledge by understanding the new textbook series *Junior and Senior English for China. Junior English for China* contains such cultural knowledge as Western festivals, the world's population, the pyramids, American and British English, good manners in the West. *Senior English for China* contains such topics as Karl Marx, Bob Geldof, Disneyland and body language. "In the Chinese context, these textbooks offer considerable innovation in [teaching] methodology" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). As a result of learning, "many Chinese teachers now recognize the need to include social and cultural information in English classes in order to strengthen learners' communicative competence" (Zheng 1990, cited in Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

Fourthly, teachers learn to use the Five-Stage Approach which was introduced in the *Teacher's Book* for *Junior English for China.* The five stages are 1) revision, 2) presentation, 3) drilling, 4) practice, and 5) consolidation. It can be used "for teaching new language points, vocabulary, structures and functions and may also be used for teaching of reading and listening skills" (Adams, 1994). Specifically, the procedures are as follows:

After *reviewing* related language in Stage One, teachers go on with the new lesson. In Stage Two they *present* new language points, either in spoken or written form by necessary explanation and/or demonstration in teaching situations to make pronunciations, forms and meanings as clear as possible. In Stage Three, they *drill* the items in the forms of mechanical, meaningful and communicative drills with stress on making correct forms in order to help students consolidate previous learning and form language habits and skills. In Stage Four, they organize students to *practice* in the activities to use the new items for communication. In Stage Five, they drill the items students have not mastered and go on for *consolidation* of the above achievements and for development of writing skills, i.e. students use what has been learned to practice written activities.

Among the five stages, the practice stage is important in which teachers train students to learn to use language for communication. The practice activities include "pair work and group, acting and games" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) and also includes the activities of "information gap" and "transfer of information" (Grant & Liu, 1992).

Fifthly, teachers learn strategies on how to overcome difficulties. Proficiency in English and familiarity with the target culture is essential for language teaching, but is not enough for using CLT in China. Because the difficulties can hinder teachers' adoption of CLT, it is necessary for teacher to learn how to cope with the difficulty in order to teach communicatively. Following are some examples of these coping strategies:

- *How to deal with large classes*: teachers can rearrange the desks and chairs to leave room for various pair or group activities. Limit teachers' talking time and let students participate various communicative activities like information gap, role-play and game.

- *How to motivate students to communicative*: tell students that they have to develop communicative competence if they want to pass the test to enter university for further

study, if they want to go abroad, and if they want to find a good job with higher paid. The development of communicative competence can meet their needs.

- *How to deal with the materials*: if it is possible to cover the materials needed for the test but try to introduce some authentic materials

Test Reform to Include Communication Components

The Matriculation English Test (MET) began to include contents of language use. The MET test used to consist of "language usage section" to assess linguistic competence on phonetics, spelling, grammar and vocabulary. After 1992, the "language use section" was added to measure the four language skills used for communication. Li (1991) mentioned the reform on the contents: translation as a subtest was deleted; the formal language usage (i.e. phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) was downgraded; and the applied and practice aspects of listening to dialogues and answering the questions, reading comprehension and compositions have been increased in weighting. The MET has moved from an exclusive concern with language knowledge towards a test of students' ability to use English for communication.

Publicity of the Advantages of Using CLT

The educational authorities publicized the advantages of using CLT. For example, CLT views language as a tool for communication and emphasizes use of language for communication. CLT insists that interactional speaking activities in classrooms be instances of real communication. CLT ensures that students have sufficient exposure to the target language. All these would develop in students an ability to use English for communication. Because CLT aims at communicative competence, students might be more competent in the use of English for communication. A good level of English would help them considerably: to enter and graduate from university; to obtain better jobs, especially those in companies or joint ventures which have international connections; to read technical materials; and to study abroad. Also, China needs citizens with a superior

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level of English language proficiency. To have significant numbers of competent users of English in a whole range of professions, businesses, workplaces and enterprises has been seen by the authorities as a key element in China's opening wider to the outside world and the drive to modernization.

Some teachers participated in the publicity. Li was one of the first defenders of CLT in China who argued that using CLT would be of great benefit to students. Her article entitled "In defense of the communicative approach" (Li, 1984) was published in the international journal *English Language Teaching.* Her argument in favor of CLT had an influence on Chinese teachers' attitudes towards CLT.

Use of CLT would also benefit teachers themselves. If CLT was not introduced into China, many teachers would not become familiar with the new trends in ELT methodology. Thus they might still use the traditional method and had no knowledge of CLT. By introducing CLT, teachers could catch up with the modern development of English teaching methods in the world. They could come to realize that teaching English is not only teaching grammar and the true mastery of a language involves communicative competence.

As a result of these measures, more teachers recognized the importance of CLT and came to accept CLT. In the mid-1990s, there was widespread awareness of more communicative approaches (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Thus, the educational authorities had a big influence on EFL teaching. They helped teachers to overcome difficulties and made CLT to be accepted as a main teaching method in China.

5. How CLT was Used in China

Eclecticism with Traditional and Communicative Teaching Methods

An eclectic method includes various elements of other methods. The Chinese-style CLT is an eclectic one and contains elements of other teaching methods. It is a method that

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uses both the traditional and communicative teaching techniques. This can be shown in the following aspects:

First, in the teaching procedure, teachers use the five stages: revision → presentation → drilling → practice → consolidation. In this procedure, it can be seen that the procedure is one that combines the procedures from the traditional method and the communicative approach:

Traditional Method:
Present → drill → practice in context

Communicative Approach:
Communicate → present language to achieve effective communication
→ drill if necessary

(Brumfit, 1979, p.121)

Second, the new syllabus states the teaching aim is to develop the knowledge and skills to use language for communication. "Strong points should be drawn from different approaches. Different approaches should be adopted for different students, different stages and different purposes"(*The Syllabus*, 1992).Therefore, in the practical teaching situation, teachers should use the teaching techniques both from the structural method and. Thus they can meet the requirements of the syllabus.

Third, the English course is eclectic one which is an "attempt to integrate more communicative approaches with the more traditional Chinese methods, certain elements of which 'have been useful and effective, and so they should not be discarded altogether'"(Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

As a result, in the mid-1990s, "there is now widespread awareness of more communicative approaches, though some caution in their application due to situational

constraints and the perception that some eclectic compromise with Chinese approaches to language teaching is appropriate (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

Use a "Weak" Version of CLT

CLT has two versions: strong and weak versions. Ellis (1999) distinguishes the two versions in terms of their contents and methodology by comparing three approaches to language teaching:

Type	Contents (syllabus)	Methodology
Traditional LT	Type A (list of linguistic items to be taught)	Accuracy (i.e. focus on target-like use of the L2)
Weak CLT	Type A (i.e. list of communicative items to be taught)	Accuracy (i.e. focus on target-like use of the L2)
Strong CLT	Type B (i.e. a series of message-oriented tasks)	Fluency (i.e. focus on message conveyance)

According to Ellis, the "weak" version is predicated on a Type A syllabus that itemizes features of communication to be taught and employs a traditional "accuracy" oriented methodology to teach it. The weak version draws on theories and descriptions of language that emphasize the functional and social side of competence. These afford a clearly defined content for specifying what is to be taught. The accuracy-oriented methodology used to teach this content is typically 'PPP' (present-practice-produce). The weak version differs from traditional approaches to language teaching only with regard to what is taught, not how it is taught. The strong version offers a far more radical alternative to traditional approaches. In the strong version, no attempt is made to specify the teaching content in terms of a set of gradable items. Instead, the content consists of a set of "tasks", which the teacher and students carry out on the classroom.

CLT in Chinese context belongs to the weak version. *Junior English for China* presents the weak version of CLT (Leng, 1997). It presents the communicative functions to be

taught, and these functions are embodied in the textbooks. For example, "how to greet" is taught in the first lesson of *Junior English in China (Book I)*. In addition, the "weak" version of CLT is "to learn to use English". The new Syllabus states clearly that the goal of teaching is to teach students to learn to use English for communication. It does not require students to "use English to learn it". On the other hand, the "strong" version of CLT requires teachers to have a proficiency level of native English speaker. However, Chinese teachers' spoken English is poor and their teaching qualifications are low. It is hard for them to teach students to "use English to learn it".

Student-centredness

On the part of students, they became more responsible managers of their own learning. This means that students wanted to study more independently by acquiring correct attitudes to English learning and correct learning methods. Students knew not only why to learn but also how to learn. This was because teachers began to do the "learning-aim education". This involves linking up students' studies with the practical benefits they can get, such as helping students see present of future needs that English can satisfy, and helping them realize that English is a golden key to the store house of knowledge in the world. In addition, teachers helped students to acquire scientific and effective methods of study so that students might gradually learn to work and achieve success on their own.

English and Chinese are Used

Many teachers, especially the junior school teachers, used English as a chief medium of instruction. This exposure to English provided many opportunities for language acquisition to occur. Students are encouraged to use the language for communication; they are not asked to learn by memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary. The use of English for communicative activities and for classroom management exchanges will make students realize that the English is a vehicle for communication, not just as object to be studied.

However, some teachers also use Chinese to help teaching. Although the Chinese language has no particular role in English teaching, there are also some reasons to use it in class. As a means of teaching tool, use of Chinese can help to get meaning across and to prevent possible misunderstanding or confusion. By the time students begin to learn English, Chinese has taken a firm hold of their mind and it is impossible to prevent them from using it. In an English learning class in China, mental translation is going on at all times, so total exclusion of Chinese is not possible. Finally, there are two types of language transfer (positive and negative) from Chinese to English which may occur. The necessary use of Chinese for comparison and contrast with English to find similarities and differences can also help students learn quicker and better. With similarities being compared, habits and skills acquired via Chinese will transfer positively onto English learning. With differences being pointed out, negative transfer will be prevented or reduced.

Thus the characteristics of CLT in the Chinese context can be summarized as follows.

	Teachers	Students	Methods	Materials
Eclectic method			√	
CLT (Weak Version)			√	√
Communicative aims			√	√
Use of English	√	√		
Use of Chinese	√	√		
Grammar teaching/learning	√	√		√
Student centredness		√		
Communicative activities				√
Four language skill development			√	√
Pair/group work			√	√

6. Conclusion

Secondary teachers in China, as adopters of CLT, met many difficulties mainly because of their limited ability to adopt it. Thus it was necessary to train teachers to have a high level of language proficiency, to gain the target culture knowledge, to have the knowledge of the new method and to overcome the negative influence of teaching traditions. The teachers thus had enough knowledge to use CLT, although they used CLT as a weak version with combined the teaching of language usage and use. Therefore, an educational innovation may meet difficulties. It is necessary to train teachers to meet the challenge and motivate students to cooperate. The educational authorities, the textbooks, the syllabus, and the test washback effect can influent teachers' adoption of CLT. These factors can make teachers to accept CLT as a main teaching method. Thus they play an important role in the educational innovation.

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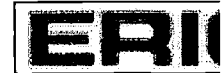
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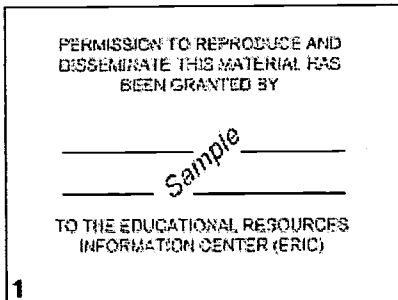
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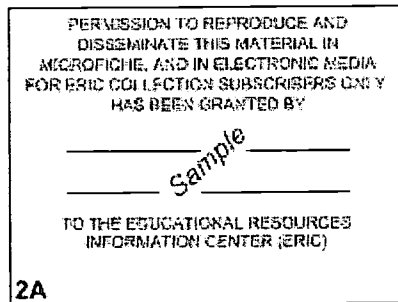The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

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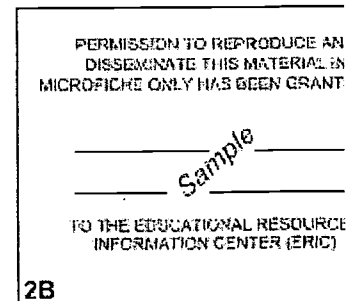PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

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