

Received: 28th September 2019 | Revised: 20th October 2019 | Accepted: 15th November 2019

Challenges faced by teachers in adopting Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract

Introduction: *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a teaching model which sets as its goal the teaching of communicative competence. It is based on a view of language as communication whereby, language is seen as a social tool which speakers use to make meaning. This study explored the challenges faced by primary school teachers in adopting CLT to teach communicative skills to English as a second language (ESL) students.*

Methodology: *This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to elicit responses from primary school teachers related to CLT teaching methods. The participants were three teachers from a national primary school in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.*

Findings and discussion: *The findings indicated that teachers have inadequate knowledge and training in implementing the CLT method. The results also revealed that the teachers are not keen in employing the CLT method because they believe that teaching should be examination-orientated and, the translation method and other traditional methods are more effective. For these teachers, language accuracy is more important than language fluency.*

Conclusion and recommendations: *In relation to suggestions to implement the CLT method, the teachers opined that their theoretical knowledge of the CLT method needs to be improved. They were also of the view that this method can be carried out effectively when the classroom size is small. This study has crucial pedagogical, practical and theoretical implications.*

Keywords: CLT, teaching methodology, method, challenges, speaking skills, ESL teachers, national primary school Malaysia

1. Introduction

Teachers and teaching methodologies have a profound influence on learning outcomes. A good teacher knows how to adopt and adapt methods to produce the best results. This study explored the teaching methodologies adopted by primary school teachers in teaching English speaking skills. It also investigated the teachers' perceptions towards using CLT, a teaching method used in most primary schools in Malaysia. Primary schools in Malaysia are widely implementing CLT to develop students' abilities appropriately in context. Littlewood and William (1981) and Larsen-Freeman (2000) stated that CLT advocates teaching practices that develop communicative competence in authentic context. Policy makers tend to introduce new approaches in progressive teaching methods such as game based teaching, using ICT as a tool in teaching as well as introducing language arts and online teaching activities through the Frog system. School teachers are required to attend training on the new approaches that are expected to be implemented in schools to achieve better results in English language teaching and learning outcomes. Based on Primary school teachers' experiences, most of the teachers are not implementing CLT in their classrooms. Several attempted to use the CLT methodology but were challenged by the students' inadequate background knowledge, ability, and the low levels of language command that they had managed to acquire over the past years.

However, the findings of some prior studies revealed that due to factors beyond the teachers' control, it would be difficult to successfully implement CLT in classrooms. While several studies (Derakhshan & Torabi, 2015; M. Chang, 2011; Kasumi, 2015) have investigated the challenges of CLT, there has been no specific study on the challenges faced by primary school teachers adopting CLT to teach speaking skills. Adi (2012) affirmed that political, economic and cultural factors can stand in the way of successfully implementing a certain language teaching methodology. The context of English language teaching in Indonesia is considered more as a foreign language rather than a second language. The Indonesian Government proposed that teachers use CLT in teaching students who do not consider English as being important as the language is not part of their everyday life. The researcher had to infuse some traditional elements of teaching because the situations were not conducive for a CLT environment. Most of the schools in Indonesia lack the infrastructure to facilitate CLT (Ariatna, 2016; Arifah, 2014; Sholihah, 2012).

In Malaysia, a number of fresh graduates are unable to speak English fluently. A study conducted by Kaur, Singh and Singh (2008) on Unitar International University graduates found that 60,000 Malaysian graduates were unemployed, partially due to poor English speaking skills. Arumugam, Thayalan, Dass and Maniam (2014) also agreed that fresh graduate nurses were jobless due to their inability to speak the English language clearly. The CLT method has been applauded as an effective approach for enhancing students' speaking skills (Mangaleswaran & Aziz, 2019).

Another purpose of the study was to investigate the teaching process and students' learning development in authentic classroom situations, as it was considered important to explore teachers' perceptions on the use of the CLT method and its influence on speaking. The importance of this study was premised on finding solutions to these problems for consideration by policy makers. The study findings could also provide useful insights and ideas to ESL teachers and learners on how to manage their teaching and learning activities for the successful implementation of the CLT method. According to Sato and Kleinsasser (1999), teachers who do not have a thorough understanding of CLT find it difficult to plan teaching activities, thus quickly returning to traditional methods of teaching as they are more comfortable in using conventional teaching practices. A study by Meilyaningsih (2015) found that the CLT method improved the mastery of vocabulary among 5th grade students. The researcher departed from traditional teaching methods and used games and role-play activities to enrich the students' English vocabulary. The intervention not only showed improvement in the students' mastery of the English vocabulary but also increased their motivation to learn new English words and their meanings on a daily basis. The findings of a study by Meilyaningsih (2015)'s revealed that the students found that the CLT method had helped to improve their English vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation. In addition, the CLT method helped to raise their self-confidence in using English language in natural contexts.

Similarly, Pungothai (2013) believed that the CLT method improved speaking skills among students who are not proficient at speaking the English language. She also stated that role-plays can be used to improve students' speaking skills. There was improvement in areas related to vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar which are essential components facilitating speaking skills. The students also showed positive responses toward the implementation of the CLT method in class. According to Pungothai (2013), the students were highly motivated because they were actively participating in the learning process by frequently responding to the teacher's questions. One notable factor was that interactions among shy students improved tremendously. However, some studies (Ali & Walker, 2014; Alam, 2016) showed that the CLT method cannot be successfully implemented due to factors beyond the teachers' control.

Raissi, Nor, Aziz, Zainal and Salleh (2013) investigated how CLT is understood and implemented in Malaysian secondary schools from the students' point of view. The study showed different contextual and cultural problems regarding the implementation of CLT from the students' viewpoint. In addition, they discovered some mismatches between what is going on in Malaysian secondary schools' English classes and what has been assigned to be conducted by the curriculum of the Ministry of Education. Studies on the implementation of the CLT method in Malaysia, especially from the teachers' points of view, are limited in Malaysia. As such, this study explores the challenges faced by teachers in adopting the CLT method in a Malaysian primary school.

The research objectives (ROs) of this study were to investigate:

- RO1: The challenges faced by teachers in adopting the CLT method in the ESL classroom.
- RO2: Teachers' suggestions to carry out the CLT method in the ESL classroom.

Based on the research objectives, two research questions (RQs) were formulated:

- RQ1: What are the challenges faced by teachers in adopting the CLT method in the ESL classroom?
- RQ2: What are the teachers' suggestions in carrying out the CLT method in the ESL classroom?

2. Literature review

Hymes (1972) stressed that communicative proficiency is the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language which the speaker-listener possesses. According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence refers to the knowledge and skills necessary for communication. It comprises four components - grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Both of them had established the theoretical framework for second language teaching and the principle of CLT.

Conversely, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) explained the importance of language teaching methods and their use in teacher education. Firstly, methods serve as a mirror for reflection that can help teachers in creating conscious awareness within themselves that is, awakening the thinking that underlies their actions. When teachers use a certain method, they are able to reflect on the methodology principles and actively engage students in the process of learning. Secondly, knowledge of methods is a prerequisite in the teaching profession. With it, teachers join a community of practice. Being a community member entails learning the professional discourse which community members use so that professional dialogues can take place.

Richards and Rogers (2014) emphasized that the teaching of English as an international language needs a paradigm shift. English has become a global language not because of the growth of the native speakers but rather the tremendous increase in the number of English speakers in ESL and English as foreign language (EFL) countries. Hence, the very nature of English has changed in the manner how many of its speakers make use of English and how English relates to culture. Thus, the cultural content of ELT should not be derived from the cultures of native speakers. The authors asserted that CLT is the best method to provide content and exercises to overcome cultural diversity among non-native speakers.

Thuy's (2009) study revealed that CLT is appropriate to teach English speaking skills to extrovert Vietnamese students. An experiment to determine the effectiveness of CLT against traditional methods showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the

speaking tests. The success was attributed to the students who were not afraid to make mistakes and embraced the method which allowed them to express themselves freely.

In addition, CLT has the potential to increase motivation and enthusiasm among students to speak fearlessly in classrooms. Ghosn (2010) surveyed both teachers and students by asking them to fill in two separate questionnaires. The results indicated learners' attitude among most of the students changed positively. Teachers' motivation to use CLT in English lessons was reflected in the students' motivation to learn in an active student-centered environment.

According to Adi (2012), an ideal class number for CLT should not exceed 25 students. It is common in Indonesia for students to learn in a class consisting of 40-50 students. Unlike western culture, where teachers are viewed as facilitators and equal partners in the learning process, the Indonesian culture as part of Asian culture is often considered a barrier in creating a communicative form of English learning (Sholihah, 2012). Culture has a bearing on the relationship between teachers' and students' viewpoints on learning and communication patterns. The teacher is often regarded as a superior and omniscient figure in disseminating information and knowledge. The students are not expected to question, dispute or engage in discussions with their teachers. This culture is also prominent in several schools in China (M. Chang, 2011).

Powell (2015) however showed that small classes need not necessarily be better than large classes and vice versa. She also gave the pros and cons of teaching in both large and small classes. Small classes have three main advantages. First, there is closer relationship between teachers and students. Second, both low and high achievers can benefit in a small class. Students who are struggling to follow lessons are more likely to receive extra help in a smaller class setting. Third, large classes are not necessarily a bane in teaching and learning English. More students mean more ideas can be generated in class. Diverse opinions and views from more students provide richer information to be utilized in a creative manner. Similarly, Zhang (2014) noticed several benefits in teaching large classes as they provide more opportunities for student interaction.

The CLT method or Communicative Approach was introduced in Taiwan in the late 1970s to somewhat replace traditional methods of teaching all English Language skills (M. Chang, 2011). S. C. Chang (2011) was sceptical of the opinions of numerous Taiwanese scholars and experts who discussed the merits of teaching grammar through the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) instead of the CLT method. He tested both methods to determine which method was more appropriate for teaching and learning grammar for the experiment. Two classes were selected from the Applied Foreign Language Department and the classes were taught using the Grammar Translation Method and the CLT method respectively. The results favored the assertion made earlier by the Taiwanese scholars and experts. The grammar test scores of the

students who were taught in the GTM method class were higher than that in the CLT method class. However, the researcher was of the view that combining of both methods would have yielded better results than adhering strictly to a single method. This finding could only have been ascertained if a third methodology combining GTM method and CLT method was used in the research.

Likewise, M. Chang (2011) explained that the effectiveness of CLT is integrated between policy and practice. The factors that impacted the implementation of the CLT method in Taiwan were related to teachers, students, the educational system and suitability of CLT in the local context. Teachers need to have proper training, not only to understand the concepts of the CLT method, but also to successfully implement them in classrooms. Teachers should not discard the CLT method and revert to traditional methods because of the barriers they faced in the initial stages. For example, students may be passive or shy to participate in class activities. They may not be ready for the exclusive use of English and not their mother tongue in classrooms. The CLT method cannot attain the desired results if students do not want to participate or engage in group work. Teachers should give a certain amount of time for students to adjust to the new learning environment. However, the implementation of the CLT method would be difficult in a situation where the focus of the education system is on examinations and students' grades. Examinations need to be modified to include the CLT method components such as speaking competency. The curriculum should be in line with the CLT method activities and exercises.

Studies by Panhwar, Baloch and Khan (2017) and, M. Chang (2011) also highlighted that the CLT method cannot be effective in large classes as it is more difficult to monitor classroom activities. A teacher cannot give equal opportunities to all students to practice English in a classroom of more than 40 students within an hour.

3. Methodology

The researchers employed a qualitative method using interviews to collect the data. For this study, the participants were teachers from a small national primary school in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The primary school has a population of 520 students from year one to year six. There were three classes for each standard or year. The classes were not graded so the level of English language proficiency of students from each class was only at an average level. This assertion is also reflected in the results of the academic tests given to students from time to time. In other words, each class had a proper mix of high achievers and moderate students. Each class consisted of 35 to 45 students. The usage of English language outside the school was limited. The students were from the middle and upper middle socio-economic status. Most of the students did not use the English language beyond academic requirements.

There were 12 English language teachers in the primary school. Based on purposive sampling, one male and two female teachers who were teaching year four were selected as samples for the study. Two of them had between 10-12 years of teaching experience and one of them had more than 13 years of teaching experience. Based on the reports from the school headmaster, all three had tertiary qualifications and teaching experience in all standards from standards 1 to 6. Two of the teachers held a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in English language teaching while one held a Master of Arts degree, majoring in English language teaching. The data for this study was gathered through focus group interview sessions. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The data were then analyzed to identify emerging themes.

4. Findings and discussion

RQ1: What are the challenges faced by teachers in adopting the CLT method in the ESL classroom?

Interview question 1: Do you think the CLT method benefits students in the ESL classroom?

Teacher A (male)

Yes, ... to a certain extent.

Teacher B (female)

I think so....

Teacher C (female)

Yes, but not always.

Interview question 2: Do you employ the CLT method in your ESL classroom?

Teacher A (male)

Yes, but not to the maximum level.

Teacher B (female)

Yes, sometimes.

Teacher C (female)

Yes, I try to utilize this method when necessary.

Interview question 3: What are the challenges faced by you (teachers) in adopting CLT method in your ESL classroom?

Teacher A (male)

It is not easy to adopt the CLT method. To be frank, I am more examination oriented because the number of passes in the Ujian Peperiksaan Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) is more important for the school than the proficiency of speaking skills. Moreover, speaking skill is not tested in UPSR. So, more emphasis is given on writing and grammar components.

Teacher B (female)

A lot of challenges...There is less focus on speaking activities in the classroom compared to writing because speaking skills are not tested in UPSR examination which is a standardized examination for students in primary 6.

Teacher C (Female)

I also feel that students are not from English speaking families though they are from a city area. Mother tongue is their only tool of communication at home and school. English is only used by them if they are forced to speak in the classroom. I prefer to use Malay language as a tool of translation and moreover allow students to speak Malay language in the classroom as an encouragement for the students to participate. This is due to the students who are shy to speak and reluctant to participate in classroom activities.

Teacher A (male)

Hmm...CLT focuses on fluency but teachers' focus on accuracy as teachers rigidly follow the grammar rules. This make students easily give up speaking...This method is not suitable for all students and teachers too. Thus, this method will be suitable for advance and intermediate rather than for beginner.

Teacher B (Female)

Eh...sometimes I start the lesson with CLT method but later switch to traditional method as I feel that I must emphasize certain grammar component that ended up in drilling.

Teacher C (Female)

One more problem....Ah...most of the time only one teacher is selected from a school to attend CLT training. The teachers do not carry out in house training for the others due to time constraints and senior teachers are not keen to learn as they feel their traditional method is always superior.

The responses to interview questions 1 and 2 clearly suggested that all the three teachers were not 100% convinced that the CLT method benefitted the students in the ESL classroom. Their responses also indicated that they did not employ the method frequently in teaching.

In relation to the challenges faced by teachers in utilizing the CLT method in the classroom, Teacher A stressed that it was not easy to adopt the CLT method. His teaching method was more examination orientated because the number of passes in public examination (UPSR) is more important for the school than the proficiency of speaking skills. As such, he did not give emphasis to speaking skills which is not tested in the public examinations. Similarly, Teacher B asserted that she gave less importance to speaking activities in the classroom compared to writing because speaking skills are not tested in the UPSR examination. The findings of the study provided evidence that the sampled teachers were unable to carry out the CLT method as they preferred more examination-oriented teaching method? in order to achieve high grades in the Malaysian standard examination. This is consistent with the results of a study by M. Chang (2011).

In addition, Teacher A said that although the CLT method focuses on fluency in speaking, the teachers focused on accuracy as they rigidly followed the grammar rules. As such, the students easily gave up on speaking English in the classroom. According to Teacher A, the CLT method is more suitable for students at the advanced and intermediate levels rather than for beginners at the primary level. These findings paralleled the findings by Raissi et al., (2013) which showed that teachers believed that grammar should be taught using traditional methods such as introducing sentence patterns and sentence structures.

However, Teacher C opined that although her students are from the urban areas, they did not speak in English because they are not from English speaking backgrounds. Most of the time, they spoke in their mother tongue at home and in school. As such, she used the translation method to teach English. She also allowed her students to speak using the Malay language during English classes as an encouragement for her students to participate in class activities. If she used the CLT method, the students felt shy to speak and were reluctant to participate in the classroom activities. These findings are consistent with the findings by Raissi et al., (2013) which indicated that teachers often applied the translation method in secondary school ESL classes as they thought this method was more secure for teachers and students.

Teacher B, who sometimes started her lessons with the CLT method, tended to switch to traditional methods because she felt that she should emphasize on certain grammar components and ended up in drilling her students. In other words, she found it difficult to employ the CLT method in her ESL classroom. These findings also indicated that the sampled teachers did not have thorough knowledge and skills in utilizing the CLT method in the classroom. These findings are also consistent with the findings by Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) who stressed that those teachers who did not have a thorough understanding of CLT could hardly develop practices; thus, they tended to return to traditional methods.

Teacher C highlighted that another challenge that teachers face for implementing CLT is the lack of training. According to her, most of the time, only one teacher was selected from each school to attend the trainings provided by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) or Education Department. The teachers who attended the training did not carry out inhouse training for the others due to time constraints. As such, the knowledge and the skills were not imparted to rest of the English teachers. Furthermore, senior English teachers were not keen to learn new methods (CLT) as they felt that their traditional methods are always superior.

RQ2: What are the teachers' suggestions to carry out the CLT method in the ESL classroom?

Teacher A (Male)

CLT method is difficult if the education system focuses too much on examination and student's grades. Policy makers should make speaking and communication skills in English as aspects to be examined in standardized exam.

Teacher B (Female)

Our education system should not be examination orientated, then teachers will have more time for CLT. Also, there must be more training and workshops for English teachers on CLT. Senior teachers must use CLT, not traditional methods or translation method. And encourage students to speak in English in ESL classroom.

Teacher C (Female)

The teacher who went for CLT training must carry out inhouse training for other English teachers. This is important...then only we can learn the knowledge, skills and how to carry out class is big. I suggest that teachers' theoretical knowledge of the method needs to be good in order to practice CLT in the classroom.

Teacher A (Male)

Student number in our class is big, 45 students. Around 20 students is easier to apply CLT.

The findings from the interviews indicated that the sampled teachers were unable to carry out the CLT method because the focus of the Malaysian education system is mainly on examinations and student grades (Teacher A and Teacher B). If the system is changed, teachers will have more time to adopt the CLT method to teach speaking skills to primary school students. In addition, Teacher A opined that policy makers should make speaking and communication skills in English a component to be examined in examinations so that schools and teachers will give more emphasis to CLT.

Teacher B and Teacher C suggested that the teachers' theoretical knowledge of the CLT method be improved in order for them to practice it in the classroom. As such, it is important to equip English teachers with CLT knowledge and skills through inhouse trainings and workshops. Teacher B stressed that senior teachers should not discard the CLT method and revert to traditional methods and translation methods. She is of the opinion that teachers should encourage students to speak in English in the ESL classroom.

In addition, Teacher A informed that currently student enrolments in the classrooms are large (about 45 students in a class). As such, it is difficult for the teachers to do good monitoring and employ CLT. A class of around 20 students would be ideal for CLT implementation. These findings supported the findings by Panhwar et al. (2017) who explored the causes of failure of CLT in Pakistan. Apart from cultural barriers, the authors singled out large classes as the main reason for the failure, which is beyond the control of teachers. Teachers found it difficult to use CLT in large classes because of limited time for interaction (Chang, 2011).

This study revealed that the CLT method is not fully implemented in schools due to large classroom enrolments (Teacher A). As such, policy makers should take the necessary measures to reduce the classroom enrolments and facilitate the CLT method of teaching. In addition, senior teachers should not discard the CLT method and revert to traditional methods. Curriculum developers should provide training to all teachers on the CLT method to improve students' English language speaking skills.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study revealed some important findings which have theoretical, pedagogical and practical implications. In term of pedagogical implications, all the respondents (teachers) were not convinced that the CLT method benefited the students and they were reluctant to employ it in the classroom. The findings also indicated that teachers have limited knowledge and skills on CLT because not all the teachers were trained in this method. As such, it is important for all ESL teachers to have the required knowledge, skills supported with adequate trainings on how to employ the CLT method to teach speaking skills.

The findings also revealed some issues such as misconception among teachers on the translation method, examination-oriented teaching, students' background and large classrooms. As such, for practical implications, MOE should consider small classrooms for primary schools to enhance students-teacher interactions and improve speaking skills among students. In addition, MOE should ensure that the education system in primary schools are less examination orientated so that teachers can give equal emphasis to speaking skills as well as reading and writing. Further studies should be conducted on how to examine speaking skills.

In terms of the theoretical implications, the findings of this study supported previous findings that it is not easy for teachers to employ CLT without proper training as this method requires both teachers and students to really work actively in class. Teachers must also think of innovative ways to enhance student communication and interaction. If teachers keep on skipping speaking skills in ESL classrooms, students will suffer from failure in communicating or interacting effectively in future.

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