

TEACHERS' INTERPRETATIONS AND PRACTICES OF CLT IN PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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Received: 04 June 2024/ Accepted: 15 July 2024/ Published: August 2024

<https://doi.org/10.70117/hdujs.E9.2024.637>

Abstract: *Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been introduced for several decades and has been widely accepted as one of the most influential modern language teaching approaches. However, misconceptions about CLT continue to exist among language teachers. This paper reports on a multiple case study investigating how primary English teachers in Thanh Hoa province interpreted and practised CLT in their specific classrooms. Data were collected from interviews and observations of teaching. Findings show that each teacher interpreted CLT in a different way, and each held some misconceptions about CLT, which in turn led to their mis-practice. Implications for policy and practice are provided.*

Keywords: *Communicative language teaching (CLT), English as Foreign Language (EFL), primary English teachers.*

1. Introduction

Since the start of the 21st century, many Asian countries, including Vietnam, have undergone dramatic reforms in English language education, of which the most important one is the move in the direction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Communicative Language Teaching is an approach to language teaching developed in Western contexts since the early 1970s (Richards, 2006). It was developed as a response to previous structure-based approaches such as Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual. It shifts the focus of language teaching from building up grammatical competence to the development of communicative competence, the ability to use language efficiently and appropriately for communication in a speech community (Richards, 2006). Ever since it was developed, CLT has been considered as the most effective approach of teaching language to develop learners' communicative ability. It is also the most popular method in the context of teaching English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011). Therefore, in the past 20 years, CLT has been adopted in many language programmes, schools, and classrooms in most parts of the world, particularly Asia and Africa (Harmer, 2015). However, the application of CLT in the classroom has raised concerns for researchers, educators as well as policy makers.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Principles of Communicative Language Teaching*

CLT was developed as a response to an interest in developing learners' communicative competence. Today CLT is seen as a set of core principles about language learning and teaching. The most overarching principles of CLT can be described as follows.

Make real communication the focus of language learning.

Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.

Be tolerant of learners' errors as they indicate that the learner is building up his or her communicative competence.

Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.

Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together.

Let students induce or discover grammar rules. (Richards, 2006, p.13)

2.2. *The Application of CLT in the classroom*

The application of CLT in some Asian EFL contexts has not always been successful (Butler 2011). Many issues have been identified and categorised; these include conceptual, classroom-level, and societal-institutional constraints (Butler 2011; Wei et al., 2018). Conceptual constraints refer to the conflict between the ideologies underpinning CLT and its principles and the traditional views on teaching and learning in many Asian countries. Classroom-level constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional hours, and difficulties in classroom management, which are common issues across Asian EFL contexts, are identified as the major obstacles to CLT implementation. Societal-institutional constraints such as washback from exams, the lack of exposure to authentic language, and the lack of opportunities to use English for communicative purposes outside classrooms are the main reasons which demotivate students from learning English, and English teachers from applying CLT (Butler, 2011). In addition, poorly equipped and crowded classrooms in Asia also make it impossible to apply CLT (Copland et al., 2014).

Furthermore, in many Asian EFL contexts, CLT principles and pedagogical applications are often not clearly transmitted to teachers (Copland et al., 2014), leading to teachers holding a range of misconceptions about the nature and principles of CLT (Butler, 2011; Diana, 2014;). The three most common misconceptions identified are: (1) avoid teaching grammar; (2) teach only speaking; and (3) use pair work and role-play excessively (Diana, 2014; Littlewood, 2007; Thompson, 1996). These misconceptions prevail among Asian EFL teachers, leading to what could be termed mis-practices in the classroom (Diana, 2014).

3. Method

3.1. *Participants*

The participants were four English teachers teaching at different schools in a large town in Thanh Hoa province. The four teachers had different experiences teaching at

primary level, and in the interviews revealed their different views towards the curriculum's pedagogical requirements. All four teachers were female, aged between 35 and 45, with a university degree in English teaching. Their teaching experience ranged from 14 to 19 years. All four taught across Years 3, 4 and 5, the school grades where the national primary school English curriculum was mandated. The participants were given pseudonyms: Dao, Cuc, Sen and Mai. Table 1 presents their profiles.

Table 1. Teachers' Profile

Teachers	Teaching experience	Teaching experience at primary level	Year level	Qualifications	English Proficiency
Dao	15 years	7 years	Year 3 and 4	Bachelor	B2
Sen	14 years	1 year	Year 4 and 5	Bachelor	B2
Cuc	18 years	15 years	Year 5	Bachelor	B1
Mai	19 years	15 years	Year 3 and 4	Bachelor	B2

3.2. Research procedure

The research was conducted over 4 weeks and involved: an initial interview with each teacher at the outset, four classroom observations, and follow-up interviews after each observation. The initial interview was for the teachers to talk about CLT: how they learned about CLT, how they defined CLT, and how they understood its principles and pedagogical implications. The observations were to collect data about the teachers' actual teaching practices. Follow-up interviews were to seek the teachers' clarification of their observed practices. The teachers were asked to provide detailed examples to illustrate their beliefs about CLT in order to explore the relationship between their beliefs and practices and possible factors that informed their knowledge of CLT and those that influenced their practice.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Initial interviews were conducted at the teachers' schools. Each interview lasted around 60 minutes. Four non-participant observations of each teacher in their classrooms were conducted, using semi-structured observation protocol to record teachers' CLT activities, and each lesson was also videoed. Follow-up interviews, lasting about 10 minutes each, occurred after each lesson. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Vietnamese. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese and were member checked with the teachers; observation notes were checked and edited; and videos were re-sized and transcribed, ready for analysis. In the first cycle, open coding techniques were

used (Miles et al., 2014). Codes as labels were attached to words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs which denoted the teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding CLT: definition of CLT, CLT principles, characteristics, activities, and techniques. The videos were also coded by attaching labels to video segments which denoted the teachers' practices regarding CLT. Then, resultant codes from both texts and videos were compared and interrogated. The codes were then further compared, checked for consistency, and grouped under the two main themes: (1) teachers' interpretation of CLT and (2) teachers' practices of CLT. In the final stages, quotes were extracted and translated into English. The translation was done by the author and was checked by a colleague.

4. Findings

4.1. Teachers' interpretations of CLT

The teachers confessed that they did not really understand CLT even though they had heard and learned about it at some training workshops. All said that they had vague ideas about the key principles of CLT and their pedagogical implications.

I have heard about CLT at some training workshops, but I still don't really know what it means and how to use it. (Sen)

I have heard a lot about it (CLT), but I can't really tell what it is. (Cuc)

I can't really define CLT. (Dao)

Therefore, each teacher interpreted CLT in a different way, based mostly on what they gained from their own teaching and learning experiences.

CLT is different from what I learned when I was a student... I do not focus on teaching grammar. Instead, I focus on listening and speaking (Dao).

I did not learn to communicate in English; thus, I still can't communicate. I always feel nervous when I have to speak English, or when talking to foreigners... So, I think children today should learn to communicate (Cuc).

For Dao, CLT meant teaching listening and speaking, and using songs, games, and pair and group work activities. It also meant no grammar teaching.

CLT means the focus of teaching is on communication, especially on developing listening and speaking skills, rather than on teaching grammar knowledge.

You can't teach grammar to young learners...They listen, listen and listen...then they talk. They do not learn to talk by learning grammar.

I do apply CLT in teaching because I never miss any listening and speaking activities in the textbooks. I also use songs and games in teaching...I use a lot of pair work and group work. I also often ask students to speak English in class.

Cuc interpreted CLT as teachers speaking more English in class and using interactive activities such as role-play, singing, chanting and games.

As I understand it, to apply CLT in teaching means that teachers try not to speak Vietnamese in class, and they should provide students with opportunities to practise using the language by role-playing, singing, chanting, and playing language games.

On the other hand, Sen interpreted CLT as adding quizzes, songs, and games to a traditional lesson and providing students with chances to practise language items orally. Also, she believed that rich sources of teaching resources should be provided, and students should have an environment to practise the language if CLT was to be implemented.

I think CLT means learning a language through practising using the language...I often organise activities such as singing, quizzes or games...I also encourage students to speak English in class... I apply an 'English only' policy. I even use little punishments as a harsh way to strongly encourage my students to speak English.

Mai, in contrast, interpreted CLT as a teaching approach which was in opposition to the traditional form-focused methods. She claimed that CLT failed to equip students with grammatical knowledge, which was necessary for paper-and-pencil tests and for a smoother transition to higher school levels.

If I teach them [students] to communicate, then they can't pass the tests. If I teach them to pass the tests, then they can't speak English.

English teachers at secondary level still have a form-focused teaching approach. If I focus on developing communicative skills for my students, then, later, secondary school teachers would complain that my students lack basic grammar knowledge and that we primary school teachers do not do our job well.

From what they said in the interview, it is clear that the teachers in the current study did not have complete understanding of CLT. Each interpreted it in a narrow sense by mentioning a certain aspect of CLT as the basis for pedagogy. In general, the teachers understood CLT as 'no grammar' and they all stressed the teaching of oral skills, and all considered games, songs, and pair and group work activities as essential components of CLT. However, they focus strongly on error corrections and ignore fluency development activities.

4.2. Teachers' practices of CLT

Data from observations and interviews revealed that the teachers practised CLT in various forms. Dao spent most of her class time conducting oral activities, meanwhile skipping sections in the textbooks that focused on reading and writing. She organised many different short activities in a lesson and employed strategies and teaching techniques such as using flashcards, realia, gestures, total physical response (TPR) activities, reading in chorus, memory games, spelling games and translation activities. In addition, an essential part of her lesson was having students work in pairs and groups. However, all the activities conducted were mainly for teaching vocabulary; there were limited chances for students to communicate in English. Pair and group work activities often went no further than asking students to take turns to read a text.

Similarly, Cuc also used pair and group work activities, role-plays, and games in every lesson. In addition, a key feature of her lesson was the use of target language in

teaching: she attempted to speak English in class; she also strongly encouraged her students to speak English by applying the '*English only*' policy. However, despite such attempts, Cuc's teaching practice still drew mainly on the classic grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. All the lessons followed the basic model of Presentation - Practice - Production (P-P-P): she started each lesson by presenting the new language input (vocabulary and/or sentence patterns) clearly, both on the green board and the projector; then controlled practice was conducted through individual, pair work, role play and choral repetition; in the production stage, students were given chances to have some free practice.

Sen also used interactive activities such as games, songs, and chants in all her lessons. However, such activities were only used as add-ons to her 'traditional' lesson rather than being used as the main teaching activities or techniques. She always started a lesson by teaching vocabulary, grammar rules and sentence structures; then came the oral repetition of new language input (a short dialogue); finally, students were asked to apply the learnt vocabulary and sentence structures in completing some oral tasks. The pattern of her lessons reflected the use of repetition, oral drilling, and controlled practice as the main teaching techniques to reinforce students' memorisation. The underlying principles of her teaching approach were audio-lingual methods based on habit formation. She expected that, with a great deal of drilling, through doing grammar exercises and controlled practice, her students would be able to internalise language samples and that they would be able to apply what they had learned in real-life communication.

In contrast, Mai deliberately chose a grammar-based method to prepare her students for tests. Mai's grammar-based method is clearly evident in her teaching practice, revealed in many of her lessons. She often spent a significant amount of class time teaching grammar, using 'traditional' methods: she singled out grammar points and structures and taught them separately, using technical terms in Vietnamese to explain the rules and strongly emphasize the rules. It reveals that Mai continued to treat grammar as factual knowledge that needed to be acquired by students. Such knowledge was taught by explicitly explaining and drawing students' attention to the rules. However, Mai also used songs and games with high frequency in an approximation of CLT methods. In all the observed lessons, songs and games were used mainly as fun activities to change the class atmosphere; there were no further activities conducted to serve the purpose of teaching.

In short, despite the variations in teachers' practices, a common feature is that all the teachers included activities such as games, songs, and chants in their lessons.

5. Discussion

The findings have shown that the teachers interpreted and practised CLT in different ways. This section discusses these findings in more detail.

5.1. The teachers' interpretations of CLT

As seen, significant variation was demonstrated in the ways the teachers interpreted CLT. However, none had a very comprehensive understanding of CLT and its implications for pedagogy. Each teacher mentioned certain aspects of CLT which reflected their limited understanding. These included: CLT meant teaching listening and speaking; CLT meant speaking more English in class; CLT meant not teaching grammar; and CLT meant games, songs, pair work and group work. Thompson (1996) referred to these as “widespread”, “persistent”, and “damaging” misconceptions, which were found to be held by many EFL teachers in different contexts (pp. 10-11). After many years, these misconceptions still prevail among the teachers in this study, and possibly among many English teachers teaching at primary schools in Vietnam.

5.2. Teachers' classroom practices

As presented, the teachers' classroom practices do not appear to reflect the key principle of CLT described by Richards (2006) and therefore could be referred to as ‘mis-practices’. These ‘mis-practices’ can be seen both in teaching language knowledge and skills to develop communicative competence and in teaching and learning activities and techniques.

In terms of teaching content, mis-practices were found in teaching language skills and grammar. The teachers gave unbalanced attention to teaching language skills and knowledge: either focusing solely on oral skills, as in the case of Dao; or putting too much emphasis on grammar and vocabulary (Cuc and Sen). In addition, mis-practices were shown in how the teachers dealt with grammar knowledge. They either avoided explicit grammar instruction (Dao) or taught it as a separate part of the lessons, as Cuc, Sen, and Mai did. These practices of CLT reveal significant gaps between CLT principles and classroom realization.

In terms of teaching and learning activities and techniques, all the teachers focused strongly on using songs and games of different types, including non-communicative games or ones that did not promote English learning. The excessive use of songs and games in the observed lessons also revealed that the teachers tended to associate CLT with songs and games. All the teachers who claimed to apply CLT employed pair work and group work with high frequency, even though these activities were used narrowly, only to practise language items. In the case of Sen, communicative activities were sometimes used only as an add-on to cheer up students or change the classroom atmosphere rather than as authentic teaching activities (Harmer, 2015).

The teachers' use of English in the classrooms is also problematic. Even though, some teachers (Cuc) attempted to speak English when teaching, they limited their English to some classroom English phrases, rather than providing rich input for the learner or acting as a communicative partner to promote learning in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have described the implementation of CLT at the classroom level. Evidence from interviews and classroom observations has revealed how the mandated CLT approach was misinterpreted and mis-practised by the teachers. Due to its small scale, this study could only provide some single pieces in the large jigsaw of the English curriculum implementation in Vietnam. However, from the study findings, we can argue that teachers' lack of understanding of the key concept was one of the main causes leading to various interpretations and implementation of CLT. Thus, we suggest that there should be sufficient training provided to the teachers to facilitate and promote CLT application in the classroom. Also, we suggest that more studies be conducted on a larger scale to investigate teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practice regarding CLT, as well as their impacts on policy implementation in general and on teaching and learning in particular.

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