

Teachers' Beliefs, Practices and Challenges in Using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in an ESL Context in the Philippines

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has as its fundamental goal, the promotion of communicative competence. It supports teaching practices that cultivate learners' abilities to effectively communicate in a second language. Over the last two decades, many ESL classrooms have adopted CLT into their curricula. Much of this research notes that teachers' beliefs play a critical role in their understanding and their implementation of CLT in their classrooms. There were however, only a small number of studies that focused on teachers' beliefs of ESL specifically in the context of the Philippines. This small-scale research project attempts to address this by exploring Filipino primary language teachers' beliefs toward CLT, their practices in implementing CLT and the challenges they encountered in using CLT.

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study. A descriptive online survey was distributed to 17 primary language teachers from a private school to gather data pertaining to teachers' beliefs, practices and challenges in implementing CLT. The data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reveal that teachers claimed they do not always use CLT in teaching the English language. Whilst they claimed they use CLT in their classroom instruction, when examined, their beliefs were at times incompatible with CLT theory. This made their conceptual understanding of CLT ambiguous. The challenges identified by participants mainly concerned the preparation of materials, students' inability to take an active role in their own learning and the uncontrolled use of the first language during classroom activities.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, constructivist approaches, teachers' beliefs

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Introduction

In the Philippines, since the early 1980s, there has been a change in the attitude towards language teaching from a structured approach, which gives emphasis on the correct usage of language forms to a communicative approach that stresses the significant and purposeful use of language. With the progress of communicative language teaching (CLT), language learning has made considerable improvements not only with its theoretical understandings but also in practice.

With the hope of improving English instruction, the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines made some reforms not only to the English syllabus but in the whole curriculum. Three decades ago, the use of CLT in language classrooms was recommended to develop students' communicative competence. However, teachers found it pedagogically ambiguous (Martin, 2014). This is due to CLT's multifaceted definition which can be interpreted differently. This is supported by Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood and Son (2007) who maintain that "many teachers remain uncertain about what CLT is" (p. 1). Some classroom-based studies (Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Nunan, 1987) have shown that communicative classrooms are uncommon, with most of the teachers asserting usage of communicative approach, but following the traditional approaches to language teaching.

The disparity between the CLT conceptual understandings and actual classroom practices has encouraged me to undertake this research. As Karavas-Doukas (1996) claims, one of the reasons for this inconsistency may be teachers' beliefs, because teachers teach according to their theoretical beliefs. Teachers' beliefs play a critical role in deciding the kind of teaching approach to be implemented in the classroom. Enthused by this perspective, I was motivated and inspired to study teachers' beliefs, practices and challenges with using CLT in English as a Second Language (ESL) context in the Philippines.

Research Objectives

This research project aims to present findings that can be of use to second language teachers and other key stakeholders such as administrators and policy makers. Therefore, the key objectives of the project are to:

- find out if the teachers use CLT in teaching the English subject;
- explore teachers' beliefs toward CLT;
- investigate teachers' classroom practices in implementing CLT;
- identify the challenges encountered by teachers in implementing CLT;
- compare and contrast these beliefs to those in the literature on CLT, in order to ascertain whether teachers' views of CLT are changing and new beliefs about CLT are emerging.

Research Questions

This research project will address the following questions:

1. Do the primary school teachers use CLT in the classroom instruction, and to what degree, if any, do the participants believe that CLT is reflected in their pedagogy?
2. What are the ESL primary school language teachers' beliefs about CLT?

3. What are the ESL primary school language teachers' practices in implementing CLT in the classroom instruction and what if any, are the challenges encountered by the ESL primary school language teachers in using CLT?

Review of Related Literature

Communicative Language Teaching

4. In the mid 1960s, CLT, a language teaching approach was introduced as an alternative to the structural method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach begins from a theory of language as communication where the goal of instruction is centered on developing communicative competence of a learner in using the target language. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), language is not only learned by merely focusing on the mastery of structures, but by attaining communicative proficiency. For this reason, learners are encouraged to communicate using the target language, which is the English language, from the introduction of the instruction through interaction.

CLT came into being after Hymes (1971) criticised that the notion of linguistic competence which Chomsky (1965), had proposed was quite limited in successfully explaining how children acquire language. Hymes (1971) argued that, "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p. 15). This highlighted that effective speakers know how to use the language grammatically and appropriately in a given context, that is "...the speaker must know what to say, with whom, and when, and where" (p. 16).

Shaped by Hymes' theory, Canale and Swain (1980) then soon after developed "pedagogical applications" (Martin, 2014, p. 478) of communicative competence which was the integration of four competencies: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Consequently, communicative competence was perceived as the motivating structure of skills essentially needed for real-life situations in which there is a "synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 20). Communicative competence was viewed as the chief theoretical concept in CLT where the focus was on the learner.

According to Savignon (2003), teachers have various perspectives on CLT depending on their background, training and practice. Some appreciate the opportunity to choose and make their own materials, which gives learners choices of communicative tasks. Others feel frustrated and disappointed. Language teaching is then challenged to support learners to develop the skills they need. Furthermore, an "understanding of sociocultural differences in styles of learning" (p. 57) is necessitated in the selection of an approach that is appropriate in achieving communicative competence.

Methodology

Research Design

With the aim of investigating the beliefs, practices and challenges of primary school English teachers in using CLT in the Philippines, I, as the researcher, needed to locate myself in the “world of lived experience, where individual belief and action intersect with culture” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). It is helpful to explain “who you are and where you are coming from” (Boden, Kenway, & Epstein, 2005, p. 42). The ontological, epistemological and axiological beliefs are the foundations of research. According to Grix (2002), these points help shape the whole research process.

Driven by an assumption that there are multiple views about reality, my study drew on a constructivist paradigm where the researcher, with the participants in this study, co-constructed meanings that were influenced by the cultural systems we are within. The paper assumes that there are multiple realities and that our way of making sense of these realities are predicated by our prior knowledge and past experiences. As a researcher, my epistemological position is interpretivism (Bryman, 2008), which emphasises the significance of the participants’ views and “recognises the impact on the research of researchers’ own background and experiences” (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006, p. 196).

A constructivist ontological framework informed my choice to use a phenomenological case study. A case study includes a comprehensive description of a setting and its participants, accompanied by an analysis of data (Merriam, 1998).

Selection of the Participants

The subjects for this study are the English teachers of a private primary school in Davao City, Philippines. Those who consented to participate were given the link to a Qualtrics online survey questionnaire. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were given semi-structured interview questions through electronic mail. The interview happened through an exchange of messages. It should be noted that it was possible for the teachers to participate in the survey questionnaire even if they did not consent to participate in the interview. Those who consented to be interviewed were informed that not all of them willing to participate in the interviews would actually be interviewed. In selecting the subset to be interviewed, I took the first six teachers who said yes.

Description of the Participants

There are 20 English teachers in the school, all females and all graduates from the universities in the Philippines. Seventeen out of 20 teachers consented to answer the online survey questionnaire but only 16 teachers answered and completed the said survey. Their teaching experiences ranged from two to 25 years. Out of the 17 teachers, only eight have a major in English and one teacher a Master of Arts in Education, with major in Teaching English and Language Literature. Other teachers have postgraduate degrees, however, not with major in English.

Data Collection Methods

Questionnaire

In this research project, the respondents live in the Philippines. They answered an online survey questionnaire created through Qualtrics. This paper used the same questionnaire that Manzano (2015) used in her study. The instrument consists of two parts: a demographic profile of teachers and teachers' beliefs, practices and challenges encountered with using CLT. Manzano (2015) submitted it for face and content validation to three English language experts and the said instrument covered what it is was designed to evaluate.

Semi-structured Interview

The advantages of using semi-structured in-depth interviews are well explained by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1990). They advocate its flexibility of the choice of words and the order of questions. If there is a need to elaborate more, then extra questions can be asked. As for the question formats, open-ended questions are chosen in attempt to enable interviewees to freely reply without any limitations on expressions (Keats, 2000). It is noteworthy to mention that questions were given to gather responses beyond what is expected from them. Interviews were done through electronic mails.

Framework for Analysis

The results of the online survey questionnaire were interpreted descriptively similar to how Manzano (2015) analysed the results of her study. As for the statistical treatment of data, the number of occurrence of the variables acquired from the participants' answers will be described and quantified using frequency counts. On one hand, percentages were used to qualify the number of respondents who choose a corresponding answer from the set of given choices. The formula for the percentage is $\text{is\%} = f/N \times 100$, where f = frequency of the variable and N = number of respondents. Ranking was used to determine the beliefs, practices and challenges that were encountered by most of the ESL primary language teachers.

In analysing the data from the semi-structured interviews, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The interviews are used to support the findings from the questionnaires and to delve deeper into the themes uncovered. IPA aims to "explore in detail the participant's view of the topic under investigation" (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999, p. 218). In this project, its purpose is to look into teachers' beliefs about CLT. This approach is phenomenological since it involves one's views "as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself" (p. 218). According to Eatough and Smith (2006), IPA is not a prescriptive kind of approach but rather a set of guidelines that is flexible and can be adapted to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Use of CLT in Teaching the English Language

CLT is one of several approaches that have been mandated in the language area from the educational mainstream. In this study of the sixteen respondents, four of them *always* use CLT, six teachers *often* use CLT and six of them *sometimes* use CLT in teaching English to their students. This indicates strongly that English teachers in the primary context seemed to be familiar with CLT as an approach. Although they know what CLT is, it indicates that the respondents do not use CLT more often; hence, CLT is not the main approach used in the English classroom instruction.

Employing CLT approaches in teaching English may be attributed to the participants' learning experiences and educational background. Miller and Aldred (2000) contend that teachers who went through teacher-centred classrooms uphold beliefs and attitudes that made it challenging for them to adopt CLT. On the other hand, not all of the teachers have a specialisation that is aligned with the subject they teach. As mentioned, only seven teachers have an undergraduate degree in English and one teacher has a postgraduate degree related to teaching English. Teaching experience was a factor that emerged in the data. Only two respondents have been teaching English as a subject for more than 16 years. The rest of the teachers have less than 15 years of experience.

Teachers' Beliefs about Language Use in CLT

The teachers consider and believe in CLT. Fifteen respondents or 93.75% believe that language is chiefly viewed as a tool for communication; 13 or 81.25% of them view that language is a way of establishing and maintaining social relationships; 11 or 68.75% of them agree that it is a system of conveying meaning; 10 or 62.50% of them believe that language is a means to perform language functions such as requesting, narrating and instructing; six teachers or 37.50% believe that language is a means to communicate notions and five teachers or 31.25% view language as a set of sounds, word phrases, clauses, sentences and texts.

It can be seen that not all teachers responded to the viewpoints of CLT in the survey. Evidently, their beliefs on the nature of language appear to be limited. Nonetheless, it is apparent that what they have is knowledge in alignment with CLT. The findings also suggest that the respondents were able to understand some of the viewpoints of language that are well-matched and compatible with CLT.

The findings on teachers' beliefs about language show the same results in the study conducted by Manzano (2015). This means that university language teachers and primary school teachers in ESL context in the Philippines believe that language is a tool for communication.

Teachers' Beliefs in Relation to Language Learning

Among the fifteen respondents, 15 or 93.75% of them believe that language is best learned through maximizing students' interaction; 14 or 87.50% agree that language is acquired by involving students in real-life communication; 13 or 81.25% of the teachers believe that by carrying out meaningful tasks and by engaging learners in negotiation of meaning and information sharing, language can be learned best and eight or 50% of them believe that through exposing students to accurate and appropriate use of the language, language can be acquired. The results show that the

respondents are aware of how language is learned by the students. However, considering the last three results, where six or 37.50% of the teachers, view that language is best learned by conducting drills and sentence patterns; five or 31.25% of them believe that students learn the language by correcting their errors immediately; and four or 25% of them view that language is best learned by asking learners to mimic or imitate and memorize dialogues, tongue twisters, songs, etc. These three beliefs about learning are ascribed to Audio-lingual Method (ALM) not CLT. The results reveal that some teachers are still uncertain about how CLT is viewed and considered in terms of learning (Manzano, 2015). Furthermore, the findings show that the English teachers are conscious and informed about the CLT approach but their knowledge in regard to CLT's theoretical underpinnings on learning seem to be not yet fully developed. Some of their views are more aligned with ALM. The results reveal the same findings in Manzano's (2015) study.

Teachers' Classroom Activities in Implementing CLT

The respondents' beliefs on CLT are valuable in this research. Among the 16 respondents, 14 or 87.50% of them apply pair and group work and students' active participation in the learning process; 11 or 68.75% of them employ task completion; 10 or 62.50% of the teachers use authentic materials, role plays and simulations; nine or 56.25% of the teachers use syllabus which focuses on language functions and employ communication games; eight or 50% of them facilitate communication activities; six or 37.50% of the teachers use problem-solving activities and correct students' errors without interference with communication; five or 31.25% of them use realia and allow students to use their mother tongue only whenever necessary. These classroom activities implemented by the respondents in the classroom illustrate that their activities are in accordance with the CLT principles. Although not all teachers indicate the CLT-compatible activities, their beliefs in language and language learning are exhibited in their pedagogical teaching practices.

On one hand, six or 37.50% of the teachers, model English dialogues speech lessons; five or 31.25% of them follow a syllabus focusing on language forms; four or 25% of the teachers consider the use of speech laboratory for pronunciation lessons and allow translation from mother tongue to English; and a teacher implements memorisation of dialogues. These activities are not in consonance with CLT's principles. These findings disagree with some of the respondents' beliefs about CLT but support a few of their viewpoints on the nature of language learning that are compatible with ALM: conducting drills and sentence patterns, asking learners to mimic or imitate and memorise dialogues, tongue twisters, songs, etc. and correcting students' errors immediately. This result implies that the English teachers' practices with regard to implementing CLT in the classroom instruction are uncertain. Some teachers cannot completely determine the practices or activities that are in harmony with CLT. Hence, some of the teachers' pedagogical practices are incoherent with their beliefs on the nature of language and language learning.

Students' Reactions to the Use of CLT in the Classroom

Whilst Manzano's (2015) study indicates that 60% of the teachers observed university students find the implementation of CLT in the classroom *very interesting*, this

research shows that among the 16 respondents, nine or 56.25% of the teachers noticed that students find the use of CLT in the classroom *interesting* and seven teachers or 43.75% of the respondents observed that students find CLT *very interesting*. The data imply that generally, students find CLT activities interesting. This means that there is recognition of CLT as beneficial or enjoyable in the course of implementing CLT in the classroom.

Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Implementing CLT

The English teachers in this study encountered many challenges as they implemented CLT in their classroom instruction. 11 teachers consider the preparation of CLT materials time-consuming as a problem. In the study conducted by Manzano (2015), this ranks number two in the problems encountered by the university language teachers. Savignon (2003) argues that teachers have different perspectives toward CLT depending on their educational background, training, experience and practice. Some teachers welcome the opportunity to choose and make their own materials, while others feel frustrated and disappointed. On one hand, eight or 50% of the teachers agree that students' inability and/or unwillingness to take an active role in their own learning is also a problem; the uncontrollable use of the native language during classroom activities and inadequate and incompatible use of CLT assessment tools for gauging students' performance are respectively the challenges pointed out by seven teachers or 43.75% of the respondents; six or 37.50% of the teachers consider institutional/ departmental policy on language instruction as a challenge for them; four teachers or 25% of them encounter challenges such as inadequate sources of CLT-compatible materials, students' lack of focus on completing a task and inability of some teachers to control students' noise during classroom activities; students' dislike of group activities are considered challenges by two teachers or 12.50% of the respondents; a teacher considers the unwillingness to play a peripheral/secondary role in the teaching learning process and time constraints as challenges in implementing CLT.

Teachers' Understanding of the Communicative Approach

One of the electronic mail interview questions asked teachers about how they understood the term "communicative language teaching". Their answers showed that they all believed they were doing communicative teaching. Some mentioned that teaching communicatively meant allowing learners to develop language structures and cognitive skills. Two teachers suggested that teaching the communicative approach meant putting more emphasis on interaction among pupils in the classroom where the teacher facilitates and students do most of the talking.

As Williams and Burden (1997) maintain, teachers are mediators who can help develop a child's learning. In a classroom situation, there should be activities that can help encourage learners improve their learning process with the use of CLT activities (Kao, 2010). Furthermore, all six teachers saw the CLT approach at primary level as more on interactive teaching. The focus is on speaking skills where the teacher provides real-life scenarios for the students to practice on. As mentioned earlier, Berns (1990) explains that in CLT, "language teaching is based on a view of language as communication, that is, language is seen as a social tool which speakers use to make meaning" (p. 104).

Pair and Group Work

The interview data imply strongly that teachers interviewed have the belief that pair and group work offer more impressive opportunities for using the target language in the classroom and also the students' active participation in the learning process plays a bigger role in learning the language. Richards (2005) asserts that pair and group work should be given emphasis because of the benefits learners can get. However, the teachers also talked about several constraints that hinder group activities such as class size and the discipline level within the class. In the school's case, each class has approximately 40 students. According to Mangubhai, Dashwood and Howard (2000), the size of the class can be one of the factors that can sometimes lead to disorderly behaviour of students. Borg (2003) suggests that class size, a contextual factor, has an impact on both teacher cognition and practice. During the interview, a teacher emphasised that classroom management is crucial in CLT implementation.

Other Classroom Practices

All six teachers mentioned almost the same activities undertaken in the English class. These are whole-class discussion, cooperative learning, role-playing, think-pair-share and use of authentic materials such as booklets and flyers. Teachers advocate the use of authentic texts because they believe that in the classroom, students are prepared for "survival in the real world" (Richards, 2005, p. 22). A teacher also mentioned about games in the class. However, some games are "pattern practice in disguise" (Mangubhai et al., 2000, p. 17). These games are known to be explicitly teaching grammar. For example, a teacher mentioned about a game on identifying verbs. It could be that the teacher experienced this game as a learner. According to Phipps and Borg (2009), teachers' beliefs that are sourced from their experiences exert most influence on their practices. Moreover, in Martin's (2014) study of private and public high school teachers, results in the focus group discussion show that teachers allowed mother tongue and intermittently introduced grammar games in the class. Hence, not all games are in harmony with CLT principles.

Teachers' Attitude Towards CLT in the Philippines

Although there are challenges, some teachers showed a favourable attitude to the introduction and implementation of CLT in the Philippines:

I want CLT to be introduced in the Philippines' English teaching because this is a very good strategy. As what I shared, I learned speaking English language not so much of the structured way my teachers taught in class but more of using the language in day to day conversation with a friend. (Carly)

Positive, because it will surely be of great help to the academe and thus, adding positive implications to the society that will later on affect the succeeding systems. (Girly)

Students enjoy this approach because they are able to apply what they have learned in the English lesson. They remember more the topics because they are involved in the activities. (Hazel)

English teachers in the Philippines encounter problems in implementing CLT in the classroom which is similar to the experiences of Vietnamese teachers who accepted CLT approach in their teaching (Hiep, 2007) and Iranian teachers who had constructive perceptions of CLT and its principles (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Also, in China, teachers seem to find it difficult to implement CLT but they are positive they can accomplish it (Liao, 2003).

While some teachers are positive towards CLT implementation, others are quite reluctant.

The idea of CLT is very ideal. But introducing CLT in the Philippines' English teaching is like a paradigm shift and therefore it really needs full support from the school administrators, teachers and even parents. (Fida)

Being in a traditional school, there are still hesitations in implementing CLT specifically when it is placed side by side the covering of the planned curriculum. (Anna)

Anna's attitude toward CLT implementation resulted to her previous learning experiences about teaching and learning (Cumming, 1989; Smith, 1996). Furthermore, her experiences in teacher-centred classrooms maintained her beliefs and attitudes that CLT is quite a challenging approach given the context of the curriculum (Miller & Aldred, 2000).

Although some teachers are quite uncertain about CLT implementation, all of them agreed that CLT should be adapted in the Philippine context. As one teacher said, "English teachers in the Philippines need to adapt CLT in their daily teaching because its effects are holistic. Traditional (teacher as sage on stage) teaching is not anymore the best approach in developing the 21st century skills of the learners. Teachers need to shift paradigm and embrace changes in order to suit to the modern times' needs". This is supported by Holliday (1994) who contends that innovation can work effectively only if appropriate to the actual circumstances of the school.

Also, some teachers who did not major in English seem to be more excited and passionate about the possibilities of CLT. Fida, Girly and Hazel all mentioned that they really try their best to use CLT to motivate students. Given the scope of this research, which is a small scale project, this is something worth investigating in a bigger research.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed Filipino primary ESL teachers' beliefs, practices and challenges in using CLT. The results from the analysis of the questionnaire and the follow-up interviews are gathered together to answer the three research questions. These main issues were discussed and interpreted under different subcategories. From the findings of this research, the following conclusions were drawn.

First, the major findings reveal that primary English teachers do use CLT in teaching the English language. However, CLT approach is not predominantly employed in the classroom instruction.

Second, although the teacher respondents claimed that they use CLT in their classroom instruction, the results indicate that some of their beliefs are incompatible with CLT. There is a discrepancy between their beliefs about CLT and actual classroom practice. Furthermore, some of their viewpoints are more aligned with other approaches such as Audio Lingual Method and Grammar Translation Method which make their conceptual understanding of CLT ambiguous. Overall, the teachers' responses show that teachers acknowledge the central tenets and strengths of this approach, but at the same time, the responses manifest their lack of comprehensive understanding of CLT principles.

Third, some of the activities implemented in the classroom do not align or agree with the CLT approach. Some teachers seem to combine grammar-focused activities and CLT activities. Hence, their pedagogical practices are incoherent with their viewpoints on the nature of language and language learning. Teachers note that students find the use of CLT interesting. However, teachers described that some students were shy, which was perceived as a barrier for the teachers to implement CLT in the class.

Finally, the problems identified by the teachers mainly concerned the preparation of materials, which consumes a lot of their time; students' inability to take an active role in their own learning; and the uncontrollable use of native language during classroom activities.

The research shows no major differences as to how teachers understand CLT regardless of their educational background. Interestingly, those teachers who did not major in English showed more enthusiasm and passion in CLT implementation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Pedagogical Implications

Apart from using authentic instructional materials, these materials should also be context-appropriate in terms of usability (Richards, 2005). The design of the learning and teaching materials by the teachers can be considered authentic in terms of giving careful consideration of their ESL classroom practice. However, this is done on the level of the teachers only. There should be a school policy or a national development of instructional materials for spoken and written English. As the interview data suggest, participants tend to use CLT based on cultural context rather than "uncritically adopt Western teaching methods at home" (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 296). This is how to meet the Filipino students' needs, to use CLT in their context, in the Philippine context.

Administrative Implications

Some participants expressed their eagerness to have series of training and more seminar-workshops on the implementation of CLT in the Philippine context. Through these workshops, CLT views may be aligned to teachers' actual practices and the challenges on the use of CLT will be lessened. As mentioned by some teachers, they need full support from parents, administrators, policymakers and other stakeholders.

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