Teachers' Understanding of the Multi-Dimensions of Communicative Language Teaching: A Case Study of Thai Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers' understanding of the multi-dimensions of communicative language teaching (CLT). A questionnaire was administered to 135 Thai EFL university lecturers; 83 completed questionnaires were returned. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants and one Thai expert in English as a foreign language. The findings revealed that the participants appeared to have a good understanding of CLT principles, although several construed the CLT ideology of choice and freedom as far-fetched. Although the participants realized that CLT is the way forward, strict adherence to CLT should be avoided. Moreover, cautious optimism is much needed, for local teaching and learning conditions must be considered. Finally, implications for further research revolving around CLT were provided—namely, an ethnographic study of CLT, students' beliefs about the efficacy of CLT and critical discourse analysis concerning CLT.

Keywords: multi-dimensions of CLT, understanding of Thai English-as-a-foreign-language lecturers, local teaching and learning conditions

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาความเข้าใจของอาจารย์ชาวไทยระดับอุดมศึกษาในเรื่อง พหุมิติการสอนภาษาที่เน้นการสื่อสาร จากแบบสอบถามจำนวน 83 ชุดและการสัมภาษณ์กลุ่มตัวอย่างจำนวน 3 รายและการสัมภาษณ์ผู้ทรงคุณวุฒิจำนวน 1 ราย พบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างมีความเข้าใจเรื่องการสอนที่เน้นการสื่อสารดีแม้ว่าจะมีกลุ่มตัวอย่างจำนวนหนึ่งที่พิจารณาว่าอุดมการณ์การสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสารเรื่องทางเลือกและเสรีภาพเป็นเรื่องที่ไม่เกี่ยวข้องกับการสอนแบบนี้ และแม้ว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างเห็นว่าการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสารจะเป็นวิธีที่ยังคงอยู่ต่อไป กลุ่มตัวอย่างพิจารณาว่าการยึดติดกับวิธีการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสารเป็นสิ่งที่พึงหลีกเลี่ยง ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น ผู้สอนจำเป็นต้องมีทัศนคติในเชิงบวกอย่างแยบยลเพราะจำเป็นต้องคำนึงถึงบริบทการเรียนการสอนของตนด้วย และท้ายที่สุด มีการนำเสนอประเด็นเพื่อการวิจัยต่อเนื่องอันเกี่ยวข้องกับการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสาร อาทิ การวิจัยเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณาของการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสาร ความเชื่อของผู้เรียนต่อการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสารและสัมพันธสารวิเคราะห์เชิงวิพากษ์กับการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสาร

คำสำคัญ: พหุมิติการสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสาร ความเข้าใจของอาจารย์ชาวไทย บริบทการเรียนการสอนเฉพาะ

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INTRODUCTION

"Even a cursory glance at the current ELT [English language teaching] textbooks and teacher training menus would show that the popularity of CLT [communicative language teaching] has not diminished in 30 years." (Leung, 2011, p. 547)

In this paper, I argue that CLT is a multi-dimensional approach encompassing linguistic competence, meaningful communication, and politics (Savignon, 2002; Chang, 2011; Whong, 2013). As Savignon (2002) put it, "[c]entral to CLT is the understanding of language learning as both an educational and a political issue" (p. 4). Specifically, the aim of the present study was to ascertain the extent to which Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers at the university level have come to understand CLT, particularly concerning the following dimensions: (1) the CLT ideology; (2) CLT classroom activities; (3) CLT-based textbooks; (4) CLT and testing and (5) CLT and culture. Taking a closer look at these five dimensions should yield results that will help both second language acquisition researchers and Thai EFL classroom teachers to better understand the strengths and shortcomings of CLT.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is CLT?

The aim of CLT is to foster second language (L2) learners' communicative ability, whereas the goals of grammar translation and audiolingualism are to teach structural or grammatical properties of English and to provide learners with pattern drills and rote memorization of isolated sentences and contrived dialogues. That is, while the traditional methods focus on linguistic forms in isolation, CLT focuses on meaning and linguistic forms in context (Berns, 1990).

To summarize, CLT regards communication both as a process and as the primary goal of second language acquisition/learning.

Apart from the concrete characteristics of CLT mentioned above, what tends to be missing in most discussions of CLT is the following: "…the promotion of an Anglo-Saxon value system of choice, freedom, and equality; the focus on the concept of work as opposed to play;…" (Sullivan, 2000 as cited in Johnson, 2004, p. 146). Ideologically speaking, CLT emphasizes choice for learners and teachers. That is, CLT is imbued with the concept of learner autonomy to the extent that learning should lie with the learners rather than teachers. This is a value that is obviously culturally specific (e.g., the American value). In fact, Sullivan (2000 cited in Johnson, 2004) went on to argue that "…the values inherent in CLT may be appropriate in North American contexts but may not be appropriate in other parts of the world" (p. 146). Therefore, when attempts have been made to implement CLT in various educational settings with different educational and cultural values, problems tend to arise. This is a topic I will discuss next.

Table 1 Comparison of the traditional methods and communicative language teaching (CLT)

Traditional Methods	CLT
Language as an end in itself	Language as a means to an end
Language taught discretely	Language presented holistically
Learning confined to the classroom	Learning in and beyond classrooms
Teaching is telling what is right and wrong	Teaching is facilitating the learner
The teacher as a knowledge giver	The learner as an explorer
Testing separated from teaching	Testing and teaching properly mixed
Set materials focusing on grammar	Authentic materials for language use

Prior studies on CLT classroom implementations

Although CLT has been considered an antidote to the traditional methods of teaching, it has received considerable criticism, especially from those working in EFL settings. Those criticisms focus on the use of role-play, group/pair work as well as ideological underpinnings. For example, the study by Orafi and Borg (2009), which focused on secondary school students in Libya, shed light on CLT. This observation study investigated how teachers (n = 3) taught a unit of material from a newly introduced communicative curriculum. Some of the major findings were that the teachers "…were filtering the content and pedagogy of the new curriculum according to what they felt was feasible and desirable in their context, and in the process transforming it so that in many ways it did not represent the intended major departure from the curriculum it had replaced" (p. 250). Therefore, the uptake of the communicative curriculum in such an EFL country as Libya turned out to be self-defeating. The authors argued that "…the uptake of an educational innovation can be limited when it is not congruent with and does not take into consideration the cognitive and contextual realities of teachers' work" (p. 243).

This incongruity between the ideal and the practical has also been reported in a study conducted by Pan and Block (2011) which was focused on Chinese learners' and teachers' language beliefs. The study found that although both the learners and teachers realized the importance of English as a global language, "…the deeply rooted examination culture leads to an exam-based syllabus, which clashes with the CLT approach which teachers are supposed to implement" (p. 401).

Focusing on the CLT approach in the Thai EFL setting, McDonough (2004) conducted a study investigating the use of pair and small group activities in a local university in Thailand. Specifically, the author examined perceptions of instructors and learners toward the effectiveness of the pair and small group tasks. The major findings of the study were that the participants who participated in the activities more actively outperformed those who did not, although the participants themselves did not necessarily find such activities useful. In short, this study lent strong support to CLT as a viable teaching technique.

Also revolving around the issue of perceptions, Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf and Moni (2006) examined Thai secondary school teachers' perceptions and implementation of the learner-centered approach, a realization of CLT principles. Through a case study, the authors found that the participants were strongly in favor of the CLT tenets but the stark reality of day-to-day teaching seemed to have prevented them from implementing the CLT tenets successfully, particularly the learner-centered principle. Moreover, the findings reported the lack of confidence in implementing the learner-centered technique. So the authors concluded that "…the teachers need more assistance to understanding basic concepts in CLT and more practical input in order to increase their confidence in developing communicative activities" (p. 5).

In a similar vein, Manajitt (2008) conducted a study focusing on the conceptualization of CLT and its practice of Thai EFL schools teachers in Bangkok. Through the use of a teacher questionnaire, a student questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview, it was reported that although the participants appeared to have a good understanding of CLT principles, they did not seem to practice what they preached (or were preached). The most striking finding was that "…both teachers and learners felt obliged to partly focus on developing knowledge and skills for the English entrance examinations rather than for English communication" (p. iv).

Khamkhien (2010) also pointed out that, in Thailand, CLT has been promoted actively by all stakeholders because of its promising results. However, in practice, the benefits of and appropriateness of CLT seem questionable. As he

put it, "… in Thailand it is deemed that CLT often fails to create sufficient opportunities for genuine interaction in the language classroom" (p. 186). Reviewing several studies concerning CLT strengths and weaknesses, the author appeared to capture the gist of the problem suggesting that "…up to now English language teaching using CLT in Thailand has not prepared Thai learners for the changing world. The idea that teachers should improve teaching competence, including testing and evaluation by promoting the communication approach needs to be revised" (p. 186).

The mixed results of CLT as reviewed above indicate that CLT's principles were perceived by the teachers as desirable and could help L2 learners to become communicatively competent; however, a strong sense of ambivalence about the effectiveness of CLT in practice has been felt because of several factors such as the external English examination format and insufficient training in CLT for teachers. This situation has been found in most EFL contexts and Thailand is no exception (Baker, 2008). Given the nature of the these problems, this study attempted to address the following questions:

Research question 1: How do research participants construe CLT principles in general and relative to their teaching contexts in particular?

Research question 2: To what extent does the participants' understanding of CLT principles reflect the strengths and shortcomings of CLT in terms of its ideology and practice?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As a preliminary study, this research necessarily entailed a broad-brush portrayal of its research construct, CLT, and its multi-dimensions. This called for a survey that would gather differing understandings of teachers—the direct stakeholders of CLT.

Questionnaire

The survey consisted of two parts. Part one dealt with demographic information; for example, gender, level of education, years of teaching experience, subjects taught, and affiliations. Part two contained 30 items focusing on five major dimensions of CLT tenets:

1. the CLT ideology (items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 17, 18, 19, 23)

2. CLT classroom activities (items 4, 7, 10, 13, 14, 20, 21, 22, 24)

3. CLT-based textbooks (items 8, 11, 29)

4. CLT and testing (items 9, 15, 16)

5. CLT and culture (items 25, 26, 27, 28).

Only item 30 was not categorized into any of the above because, although it may be perceived as aligning with CLT principles, it touched on a broader scope suggesting an interface between language policy and language teaching.

In addition to choosing a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the respondents were asked to provide reasons for their chosen scores. This resulted in a number of respondents providing descriptive answers to their chosen scores.

Responses to the questionnaire were scored from 1 to 5 on a scale using the Likert format with 1 equal to strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Mean scores and the standard deviation were calculated. Of the 135 questionnaires distributed, 83 completed questionnaires were returned. Subsequently, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three participants and one expert in order to verify the participants' overall response patterns regarding CLT tenets, its strengths and weaknesses.

Participants

English teachers ($n = 83$) at both public and private universities in Bangkok took part in this study. The participants and universities were selected by means of typical sampling (Merriam, 2009), which is a type of purposive sampling. Moreover, according to Patton (2002), "the site is specifically selected because it is not in any major

way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual" (p. 236). Given this criterion, three public universities and one private university in Bangkok served as focal points of the study; both the participants and universities exemplified typical Thai English teachers and universities. Details of the participants are shown in Table 2 below. Moreover, three participants were purposefully invited for semi-structured interviews. They were selected based on their patterns of responses that were very comprehensive and thought-provoking. In addition, a separate interview was conducted with an expert in English language teaching, who has had extensive experience in teaching, researching and supervising research studies at the master and doctoral levels in English language teaching. The three-tiered approach to conducting this study was intended to triangulate findings and the interpretation of the findings in order to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Glesne, 1999).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the questionnaire (closed-ended)

As shown in Table 3 below, the participants appeared to understand the CLT principles in relation to the emphasis on developing learner's communicative competence (e.g., patterns of responses to statements 2, 4, 5, 6, 11, 21). However, it should be noted that when asked whether CLT emphasizes democratic principles of choice and freedom (statement 1), 31.3 percent were undecided, suggesting that some of the participants did not necessarily appreciate the close connection between CLT and its political dimension.

Findings of the questionnaire (open-ended)

The patterns of responses to the questionnaire items above indicated that the participants in general appeared to have a good understanding of CLT tenets: that it facilitates language use in real-life situations and that it is distinct from the traditional methods of teaching. This understanding was further substantiated by their responses to the open-ended part of the questionnaire. I will discuss those opinions in detail, but special attention will be paid to the first dimension, the CLT ideology.

As regards the CLT ideology, the first dimension of CLT, responses varied from "nothing about democracy in CLT" (Participant 38) to "some sort of restrained democracy because the teacher will play a key role in classroom management" (Participant 73) to "I have no idea whether CLT is

Table 2   Demographic data for questionnaire respondents

		(n = 83)
Participant	n	%
Gender		
Male	13	16.3
Female	70	83.7
Highest level of education		
Master's degree	63	75.9
Doctoral degree	19	22.9
Not provided	1	1.2
Years of teaching experience		
1–5	32	38.6
6–10	22	26.5
11–15	10	12.0
16 or more	19	22.9

Table 3 Participants' replies to statements on communicative language teaching (CLT)

(n = 83)

Statement	X	SD
1. CLT emphasizes democratic principles. (+)[a]	3.84	0.773
2. CLT enables learners to become autonomous learners. (+)	4.17	0.695
3. CLT focuses on grammatical structures. (–)[b]	3.60	0.896
4. CLT emphasizes pair and group work for classroom activities. (+)	4.35	0.688
5. CLT puts more emphasis on communication than grammatical knowledge.(+)	2.12	1.130
6. CLT focuses on both knowledge and appropriate use of grammar in various contexts. (+)	3.89	0.963
7. CLT puts more emphasis on listening and speaking at the expense of reading and writing. (–)	2.95	1.065
8. CLT does not lend itself to ready-made textbooks. (+)	3.24	0.883
9. CLT focuses on the process more than the end product in testing English proficiency.	3.52	1.038
(+)	3.80	1.012
10. Teachers' role in CLT is to control every step of the teaching/learning process. (–)	4.05	0.768
11. Textbooks used in CLT help learners to see the relationships between language elements and language in real use. (+)	3.29	0.868
12. The English curriculum that I use reflects the CLT ideology. (+)	3.08	1.015
13. CLT doesn't work in my teaching context. (–)	4.29	0.863
14. The number of learners influences the effectiveness of CLT. (+)	3.51	0.861
15. The format of the English paper in the university entrance examination results in the negligence of grammar. (–)	2.71	0.994
16. The format of the English paper in the university entrance examination does not have any impact on CLT. (+)	3.51	1.017
17. CLT is not different from commonsense knowledge when it comes to conducting a class. (–)	3.70	1.009
18. Teaching methods are not that important whether it is CLT or not. (–)	3.71	0.863
19. CLT is not suitable for EFL learners (–)	3.80	0.894
20. Current technologies make CLT most suitable. (+)	4.04	0.917
21. CLT focuses on the integration of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. (+)	3.24	1.164
22. In reality, it is impossible to integrate the four skills in any teaching performance. (–)	3.16	1.204
23. Teacher's knowledge of English is more important than his/her knowledge of how to teach. (–).	2.92	1.118
24. Success in learning English depends more on out-of-class factors than in class. (+)	2.46	0.928
25. CLT focuses on the teaching of American or English cultures only. (–)	3.87	0.886
26. CLT does not restrict itself to only American or English cultures. (+)	2.96	1.017
27. Teaching culture through CLT is hard for Thai teachers of English. (–)	3.28	0.992
28. Teaching culture through CLT is hard for learners to understand. (–)	3.54	0.941
29. In general, CLT-based textbooks contain American or English cultures. (+)	3.14	1.191
30. Both the teacher and learner won't be successful in teaching and learning English as long as the language policy does not include English as an additional official language.*		

[a] (+) The statement supports CLT principles.

[b] (-) The statement is against CLT principles.

* It should be noted that item 30 was intended to be an added-on item, not necessarily gauging the participants' understanding of CLT; however, it was included here in order to see whether and to what extent they would associate the importance of language policy with the implementation of CLT tenets in their teaching contexts.

democratic in nature" (Participant 56). The remaining responses lay within the moderate range that CLT should emphasize democracy. While the response patterns to Statement 1 were somewhat uncommitted, responses to the other items in this dimension (items 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 17, 18, 19, 23) were more decisive. For example, a number of participants were in agreement that CLT was conducive to independent learning. Participant 2 said, "what I teach allows for independent learning, that is, when they have to do a role play, they will be responsible for planning the situation and every step involved." In addressing the issue of whether CLT puts more emphasis on communication ability than on knowledge of grammar, various responses were found as follows: "CLT helps the learner to be brave in speaking English in meaningful interactional contexts. Therefore, the learner can learn how to speak in a most comfortable manner" (Participant 57). At the same time, another participant argued that "… knowledge of grammar is a solid foundation for effective communication; however, grammar should be taught inductively rather than deductively" (Participant 21). Yet, another participant did not seem to like the idea that communication is perceived as more important than grammar, saying "I think CLT simply focuses on communication at the expense of grammatical accuracy" (Participant 2).

The findings from the questionnaire as discussed above suggest that the five dimensions of CLT have received both agreement and disagreement as would be expected in this kind of study. However, it should be pointed out that when asked about a broader level of CLT—its democratic ideology—many participants did not necessarily associate CLT with democracy because they may have thought about CLT from a pedagogical perspective only. This is a point raised by Pessoa and Freitas (2012) who argued that "… it is necessary to become aware of the fact that many second language and foreign language teachers have adopted a merely functional understanding of language in their classes (p. 755), thus resulting in

the "…trivialization of content and an overemphasis on communicative competence" Pennycook (1990, p. 13). However, in responding to CLT vis-à-vis classroom activities (e.g., pair/group work), they would sound more definite in their answers which were congruent with CLT tenets.

Findings of the semi-structured interviews

The three participants whom I interviewed gave the most complete answers to the questionnaire and their answers were revealing. In addition, they expressed their interest to be interviewed. During the interviews (approximately 25 minutes each), the participants (Somchai, Chatchai and Somying—all pseudonyms) were asked to comment on the general state of English education in Thailand generally and CLT in particular.

The participants were unanimous that the most pressing problem they had to deal with is the low English proficiency of many students. Somchai said, "when I asked them to focus on identifying errors in English sentences, I realized that they could not do it because they didn't know the word "error," nor did they know anything about "parts of speech." Chatchai considered the problem was that "many learners do not want to learn English; they are not motivated enough. So once they didn't get it, the problem accrued to the point of no return… really." This is a point that Somying agreed with but for different reasons. She said, "most Thai students are not good at English because they lack the opportunity to meaningfully use the language. And to remedy this problem we must start at home. You see…sitting for 3 hours in the English class amounts to nothing."

Findings of the expert interview

As part of the triangulation scheme, I interviewed Suddee for 40 minutes. The venue was her office at a local university in downtown Bangkok. Suddee received her training in English and Applied Linguistics from a Thai university and a university in the U.S. She has had extensive

experience in teaching not only language skills but also theoretical courses in second language learning. Further, she has supervised many master and doctoral research theses and dissertations. In the interview, I asked her to comment on English teaching in Thailand in general and the implementation of CLT in particular. Reported below are the many strands of her opinions toward CLT and English language teaching (ELT).

Suddee even asserted that English teaching as it is practiced in Thailand seems to have exhausted all the practical strategies. She said,

"much depends on learners. If they don't want to make the first move, things won't get any better. Of course, we do have this idea of learner autonomy, but these western concepts are good on paper, but in practice...it seems to me that students still need us. For example, I enjoy teaching students from the Faculty of Science. Even though they are not that good at English, they pay attention to my teaching. I simply use the chalk and board technique, a very traditional way of teaching. But it seems to work well enough."

In addition to the use of primitive technology and the motivation of the so-called low proficiency students, Suddee suggested that a practical policy in teacher education and development should be provided. In fact, she argued that "we need more qualified local teachers at all levels of education. If teachers are well equipped with both the know-what and know-how of English teaching, then we can hope to have a good and long-lasting future for English teaching in Thailand."

Based on the aforementioned views as revealed by the respondents in the questionnaire survey, the three interviewees, and the expert, answers to the main research questions are as follows.

Research question 1: How do research participants construe CLT principles in general and relative to their teaching contexts in particular?

The participants as a whole understood the CLT tenets, although differing levels of understanding of the CLT principles could be found. As discussed earlier in this paper, some respondents did not necessarily connect CLT with its political ideology of choices and freedom. This is understandable because it may be somewhat difficult for teachers to think about a teaching method, let alone CLT, as having a political dimension. Further, several participants also pointed out the necessity for incorporating explicit grammar instruction in their own teaching contexts, whereas some others believed implicit grammar instruction was more synchronized with the classroom reality of teaching ESP courses.

In sum, the participants viewed CLT in a positive light, but teachers have to cultivate cautious optimism in implementing its principles. The participants did not call for a monolithic set of teaching techniques because they realized that such techniques did not reflect classroom realities that could change from one context to the next.

Research question 2: To what extent does the participants' understanding of CLT principles reflect the strengths and shortcomings of CLT in terms of its ideology and practice?

The response patterns and the interview results suggest that the participants were well aware that CLT is not immune to criticism, not the least of which is the fact that it was not conceived by the teacher, but by theorists. With this awareness they selected to apply CLT principles cautiously; none appeared to have rejected CLT outright. The impression that they gave of CLT was that CLT alone is insufficient. They believed the local conditions and contingencies of English teaching such as the proficiency level of the learners and the class objectives are instrumental to successful teaching and learning. Pedagogically, they realized that CLT was the way forward. However, as mentioned earlier, they also believed cautious optimism should be the order of the day; strict adherence to any individual teaching techniques should be avoided. The combination of focus-on-form (Doughty & Williams, 1998) and

meaning-based teaching (Brown, 2009) must be observed.

CONCLUSION

The teachers' understanding of the multi-dimensions of CLT was found to be commensurate with most of the CLT tenets, although a number of participants construed CLT ideology of democracy as far-fetched. They also believed that effective teaching techniques need to incorporate language forms, functions, and meaning. However, they also believed that careful implementation should be most important. Overall, the participants seemed to point to the importance of avoiding strict adherence to CLT. Most of the participants, in a nutshell, wanted to "let all the flowers bloom" (Lantolf, 2000), suggesting that local teaching and learning conditions must be considered in implementing any teaching approach or method.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Any researcher interested in pursuing CLT in greater depth may conduct an ethnographic study of CLT in practice. By mixing and mingling with teachers over an extended period of time (at least one year), researchers may be able to generate new knowledge about CLT, an arguably Western-conceived product, in such an eastern context as the Thai EFL context. Additionally, research should be conducted focusing on students' beliefs about the effectiveness of CLT, findings, which in turn could serve to substantiate assertions about the advantages and disadvantages of CLT. Further, given the importance of the political and cultural dimensions of CLT, research focusing on the politics of English language teaching in the critical discourse analysis tradition may help researchers and teachers to engage with CLT challenges.

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