TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES REGARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract:
According to the principles of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), students are motivated to communicate with each other in the classroom context in a second language. CLT pays special attention to the students' real life needs and improving their communication skills rather than focusing on linguistic structures. During the recent years many ESL teachers all over the world have adopted CLT principles to their special educational context. After reviewing previous studies which have been conducted in this domain researchers reached to this point that teachers perceptions and ideas regarding problems and challenges of CLT implementation plays crucial role in their performance of CLT. Few studies have been conducted in secondary schools of Malaysia because of the importance of this issue a qualitative method was used in the study in order to investigate teachers' perceptions and challenges regarding CLT in Malaysian secondary schools. Researchers used semi-structured interview, in order to achieve teacher's perception regarding the CLT principles, challenges and problems regarding the implementation of CLT in an ESL context like Malaysia. Participants were 30 secondary school teachers who taught general English courses in Malaysian secondary schools. Result of the current study indicated that Malaysian secondary schools have positive attitude regarding the principles of CLT in their perceptions. And they have mentioned by using CLT principles they can encourage their students in order to speak effectively and meaningfully in a touristy country like Malaysia, which needs all their people to be fluent enough in English at society. However, they have mentioned different problems regarding the implantation of CLT in Malaysian context, since Malaysia is a multicultural society consisting of three different races such as Malay, Indian and Chinese, teachers faced different problems while working with the students from different cultures and language backgrounds. Certain situational constraints were found to hinder the implementation of CTL in Malaysia. The findings suggest that experienced teachers modified their thinking and practice regarding CLT in order to fit CLT into local classroom conditions. Some pedagogical implications have been posed at the end of the study which seems useful for the educational system of Malaysia.
Field of research: *CLT, Teacher's perception, Language teaching & Learning*

1. Introduction:

During the recent years English teachers, especially teachers of English as a second language (ESL teachers), were assigned to use communicative language teaching approach

(CLT) in their classes. As English considered as an international language all over the world and people use it for their different purposes like industry, different scientific purposes or business, the importance of English learning and teaching has been increased significantly, additionally using internet has increased the importance of English. Littlewood (2007) emphasized in the fact that some traditional methods of language teaching like Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and Audio Lingual Method (ALM) couldn't affect ESL learners in order to communicate with each other in English well. Larsen-Freeman (200) mentioned in CLT approach communicates competence of the students will be improved by using authentic materials and tasks. Savingson (2001) emphasized that CLT can affect students competence in English by pushing them to speak fluently. Littlewood (2007) mentioned that CLT recognized as an effective language teaching method in which ESL learners can communicate with each other and this method of language teaching is much more effective than the traditional teaching methods such as GTM.

According to some researchers teachers has some problems in implementing CLT in ESL contexts such as teachers problems with the size of the classes as these classes are not large enough to implement CLT, and most of the teachers are eager to take form based and knowledge based examinations which conflicts with the principals of CLT (Anderson, 1993; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007; Liao, 2003). Cohen & Teller (1994) pointed out that attitudes of the teachers and students can play a very important role in their implementation of an approach, so teachers' and students' attitudes regarding the implementation of CLT can affect their performance too. Barkhuizen (1998) investigated the importance of the classroom implementation of the teachers on the students interest in language learning in the context of south Africa, at the end of the research he came to the conclusion that teachers' classroom practices can affect student's performance to a high extent; results of this study reflected this point that south African students are eager to do form based activities rather than communicative ones.

English language teachers in Malaysia concerned with the task of producing learners with high English competence. Always a challenging question exists between Malaysian English teachers that which methods of language teaching can help their students to be more proficient in English. Some teachers believe that old language teaching methods like Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and Audio Lingual Method (ALM) still works well and seems effective for their pedagogical purposes but some of them believe on modern language teaching approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approaches which are focusing on communicative competence of the students can help them more.

Researchers had some purposes in order to conduct this study in the Malaysian context. First reason relates to the nature of CLT and its concerns of creating a learner-centered environment, in the field of language learning and teaching which has been assigned by the ministry of education of Malaysia. After conducting this research, researchers understood whether this method was effective in the context of Malaysia with diversity of L1 language and cultures. Second important goal of the researchers related to the other important characteristic of the CLT which focuses on increasing English learner's communicative competence, which seems suitable for the pedagogical purposes of the Malaysian teachers

and ministry of education of Malaysia, which can help Malaysian society to be more proficient in English in global community as the ninth touristy country all over the world. Third important reason relates to the Malaysian educational system in which they have assigned all of the language teachers to use CLT in their classes and investigating the effectiveness of this method seems necessary in the context of Malaysia.

2. Literature review:

Hawkey (2006) conducted a research on the Italian EFL teachers' perception about different principles of CLT; at the end of the study he came to this conclusion that it seems too necessary to correct grammatical errors. Peak (1996) investigated teachers' attitudes regarding the CLT principles, results of the study showed that Japanese teachers didn't want to implement CLT principles because of their educational and cultural views related to their special culture in Japan, the results also reflects teachers' different problems regarding the implementation of CLT in the context of Japan.

According to Cohen & Teller (1994) ESL bilingual English teachers had special eagerness about the CLT principles and they were ready to implement this approach in their classes. Anderson (1993) mentioned that high percentage of the teachers and students found different advantages of the CLT to apply in their ESL/EFL contexts. Liao (2003) investigated CLT principles in an EFL context like China, results of this study mentioned that most of the teachers were eager to implement CLT in their classes. Razmjoo & Riazi (2009) investigated the implantation of CLT in private institutes and public high schools results of this study showed that both of them showed favorable attitudes regarding the CLT implementation.

If we want to compare CLT to other language teaching approaches it has two different features. The first and most important feature of CLT is communicative competence, which has been recognized as the goal of language teaching and learning in this approach. Second important feature of CLT relates to the point that this approach mainly focuses on the development of the four skills through communication. Littlewood (1981) mentioned that one of the most important features of CLT is that, this approach mainly focuses on the function of the language in real life situation context and it helps learners to learn the language in an authentic context.

According to Canale & Sewain (1980), CLT has four distinguished dimensions comparing with old language teaching approaches namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence relates to the grammatical and lexical knowledge of the students which can be increased during the implicit instruction of grammar trough the CLT approach, Chomsky called it as linguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence relates to the student's perceptions about their social environment where communications between different speakers happens, such as kind of the relationship between the people who are interacting with each other, and the goal of their interactions with each other. Discourse competence means how different speakers analyze different kinds of meaning in their mind when they face

different discourses or different kinds of written forms, and finally strategic competence relates to different kinds of strategies that speakers incorporate in order to start, finish, maintain and repair their communication format.

Educational researchers investigated a lot to see what can affect teachers' perception; in 1980 they considered teachers as active decision-makers in the classrooms. Borg (2003) been conducted a research to review 64 studies on the teachers' cognitions, in this research, researcher mentioned that teachers' cognition such as knowledge of the teachers, their perceptions and their way of thinking has pivotal role in their teaching career. Also he has reported that contextual factors can affect both teacher's cognition and the way they are teaching in the classroom. In TESL studies it is a big question for lots of the researchers worldwide that which factors of language teaching can affect their performance in the classroom. What can push teachers to use different modern language teaching approaches, and what can cause them to refuse so.

Malaysian ministry of education began to introduce and implement a curriculum for all governmental secondary schools under the name of Kurikulum Sekolah Menengah 'KBSM', on 1988. This curriculum has been adopted and implemented according to the national philosophy of education in this country. The main goal of this curriculum was to develop communicative competence of the learners to learn and use language in an authentic real-life like situations in the secondary schools. This syllabus aimed to equip student's four major skills namely speaking, reading, writing & listening and other sub-skills like grammar, pronunciation & vocabulary through communications in the classroom.

This curriculum also tries to facilitate learners in order to be well-educated and knowledgeable in the global village, this curriculum also aligns with the governmental policies of Malaysia which tries to attract tourists to this country. According to the Wikipedia the free internet encyclopedia, Malaysia has been ranked as the ninth touristy country all over the world, it goes without saying that government of this country does its best in order to train knowledgeable people to be fluent to speak and host different people all over the world.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and participants

In this study researchers used a qualitative research design in which they have used semi-structured interviews to collect the required data. Participants of the study were 30 ESL (English as Second Language) instructors who taught general English courses in the secondary schools of Malaysia; their age range were between 24 to 47 and all of them were female. Participants of the study have been selected based on stratified purposeful sampling, In which researchers had some criteria in mind to choose their sample first criterion related to the type of schools in which all participants should teach in governmental schools which are following the curriculum assigned by ministry of education, second criterion related to the setting of schools all should be located in Johor Bahru district in which they are using the same curriculum of the same state in different

schools. And last criterion related to the instruction level of the participants in which only English instructors in the secondary schools have been participated in the current survey.

3.2 Interview protocol

In this research researchers designed a semi-structured interview in order to elicit participants' participants' perceptions about the nature of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Malaysian secondary schools; to elicit their favorable and unfavorable attitudes regarding CLT,   as well as investigating their challenges and problems regarding the performance of this approach in an ESL educational context like Malaysia. Also researchers asked participant's ideas regarding improvement of communicative competence among students by teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions. It goes without saying using interview helps researchers in order to go to the details of the participants' challenges and problems.

In the second phase of the study some questions regarding the quality of textbooks, other tentative materials which English teachers use beside the assigned textbooks, quality of assigned curriculum by the ministry of education of Malaysia have been investigated. After asking some questions regarding textbooks and curriculum, researchers asked participants' ideas regarding different technique of CLT in using real-life situation and authentic tasks for the interaction purposes like group discussions, debates, games, presentations, exhibitions and school's facilities for conducting such activities like multi-media, projector, radio, language lab, CD player and laptops.

In the third phase of the study researcher asked some questions regarding teacher's attitudes about teaching methods and beliefs in which he asked participants' perceptions regarding in-service training courses and their effect on teachers' performance, is any changes happened to their teaching from the beginning of their job, their ideas about the accuracy or fluency priority in CLT teaching, the role of translation in ESL contexts, their perceptions regarding grammar teaching, which one seems more useful teaching explicitly or implicitly and finally researcher asked participants whether they encouraging students to speak English outside the classroom or not.

According to the Weiss (1994), interview has been recognized as the best way of investigation of people's past experiences and the way they connect those experiences with their current perceptions. Each interview lasted between 15to 20 minutes, and each interview consisted of three main sections which will be reviewed in the following section.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Results of the first phase of the study

In the first phase of the study researcher asked some biographical questions regarding teachers' ages, their gender, their teaching experiences and their educational background.

The participants of the study were 30 ESL teachers who taught general English courses in Malaysian secondary schools, Pasirgudang, Johor, Malaysia. Their age range was 24 to 47, all of them were female teachers, 21 of them studied their degree or diploma in TESL

(Teaching English as a Second Language) while others held their degrees in other fields like mathematic which have been employed as English teachers in the mentioned schools because of the lack of English teacher. As it has been discussed before this study is a qualitative study and researchers attempted to reflect perceptions of majority of the participants. From now on pronoun "they" reflects majority of participants' opinions.

First researchers asked teachers' perceptions regarding their perception about the assigned curriculum by the ministry of education of this country and their tentative problems for applying the assigned curriculum in the secondary schools.

Table 1: Teachers' perception regarding the CLT principles

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	favorable	23	76.7	76.7	76.7
	unfavorable	7	23.3	23.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

As you can see from the above table when researchers asked teacher's overall perceptions regarding the CLT approach most of them (76.7%) mentioned favorable attitudes regarding the implementation of this approach in Malaysian secondary schools while minority of respondents (23.3 %) expressed unfavorable attitudes regarding this approach in Malaysian secondary schools. Then researchers attempted to find out reasons in which those minorities believed CLT is not useful for their pedagogical purposes. Respondents who had unfavorable attitudes regarding CLT principles mentioned it is too difficult to apply a communicative based approach in a class with the students with different L1 background. Another problem which they have expressed related to error correction which they believed by ignoring students' errors and focusing on accuracy rather fluency, errors will   be fossilized in the learner's' minds. Another problem which teachers expressed regarding the CLT principles related to teaching grammar, they believed that when you are teaching grammar implicitly students cannot understand grammar principles and they believed that teaching grammar by old methods and introducing sentence patterns and structures, students can learn better and teaching grammar by implicit instruction cannot help the learners to be proficient in grammar enough. Most of the participants believed that interactions among teacher and students and students with each other can cause students to be more proficient in English and it helps them to have a good command of English and communicative competence.

4.2 Results of the second phase of the study

In this part of the study researcher asked some questions regarding English textbooks, assigned curriculum by the ministry of Education of Malaysia and after that researcher asked about schools' facilities and activities to create authentic context for English learners.

Researcher asked participants' ideas regarding the quality of the textbooks, do they choose the textbooks and other teaching materials themselves or they have to use the assigned materials by the ministry of education. Do they use some related materials beside the routine materials, and their perceptions regarding KBSM (the assigned curriculum by ministry of education of Malaysia). Respondents expressed that all of the secondary schools of the Johor state should use the same textbook which seems to be adapted to this district, but they have mentioned that they are not only focusing on the assigned textbooks by ministry of education of Malaysia but they are using some supplementary materials like grammar and workbooks. When researcher asked participants' ideas about the quality of the textbooks most of the teachers mentioned that, except some parts the quality of the textbooks is satisfactory from their point of view but those textbooks didn't have enough authentic materials which can help students in order to improve their communicative competence from their viewpoint. When researcher discussed about the assigned curriculum by the ministry of education of Malaysia to use CLT in their classes, most of them expressed favorable attitudes to this curriculum but they have mentioned that curriculum designers should pay more attention to the student's cultures (Chinese, Malay or English) and their L1 in the assigned curriculum. They wanted to reflect their ideas regarding adaption of CLT to the specialized context of Malaysia with the students with different L1 and cultural backgrounds.

It goes without saying that one of the most important factors to teach CLT in ESL context is to create an atmosphere of real life situation. In order to create real life situation contexts in class, teachers should incorporate authentic tasks as well as group discussions, debates, games, presentations and multi-media (audio, video) to improve students' level of communicative competence during class discussions. When researcher asked about the implementation of the authentic tasks in the secondary school classes most of the participants mentioned that they are trying their best in order to create authentic contexts for the students to learn the language through interactions. But they have problems about the school facilities; although their schools have projector & CD player but they have to bring their own laptops to use projector in the classes. Another problem which has been reported in one school related to the problem that although they have language lab in their school but they couldn't use the lab due to the fact that they hadn't enough classes and they used the language lab as one class. If we want to discuss about teacher's positive attitudes regarding using authentic tasks and materials in the classroom we can say that usually they have group works and pair works in their classes, and usually they are holding English campuses in Desaru beach (in Johor Bahru dsistrict) for 2 or 3 days and 3 times a year in which they have different games and group works which increase student's level of communicative competence.

4.3 Results of the third phase of the study

In the third and last section of the interview researchers asked some questions regarding teaching methods and beliefs and respondents answered to some questions about in-service training courses, their attitudes regarding their own teaching styles and some CLT related details, which have been presented in this section.

Researchers asked teacher's ideas about the in-service training courses, effect of such courses on the teacher's performance and if any changes happened to their teaching styles and techniques from the beginning of their work or not. Most of the participants mentioned that usually they have maximum five periods of in-service trainings for one weak or less in which instructors will be informed about incoming activities and methods but it seems that not enough attention paid to CLT and CLT instruction in those schools. Most of the participants mentioned that in the in-service training classes usually instructors discuss rarely about CLT, so it seems very important to pay more attention to CLT components in these kinds of classes. Researchers also attempted to understand that if any changes happened to teaching styles of them from the beginning of their work or not; in answering this question most of the participants believed that as the time goes on they become more experienced and they improved their teaching styles and their teaching activities and they believed that by passage of time they became more adapted to CLT principles and components.

In the last section of the study researcher asked participants about their perceptions regarding some CLT features which distinguished CLT from other language teaching methods like their ideas about grammar teaching, do they prefer to teach grammar explicitly or implicitly, their attitudes regarding fluency in language or accuracy which one is more important from their view point as CLT just focuses on fluency rather than accuracy, and finally researcher gathered teachers ideas about the translation in ESL contexts and if they think it is important to work on translation in the ESL classes or not.

While answering to the questions about teaching grammar most of the ESL English teachers believe that they prefer to teach grammar in explicit manner and by describing sentence structure to the students as clearly as possible, which has some kind of conflict with CLT features and CLT characteristics. Majority of teachers believed that equal attention should be given on accuracy and fluency, and they believed that if students do not have good command of English sentence structure and word power they cannot have a good fluency as well and they believe that if we do not pay enough attention to the learners' pronunciations errors they would be fossilized in their minds. According to the secondary school teachers' belief, as they had weak students in different skills and components of English, they had to use translation in the ESL classes, and they mentioned that they have to apply translation in their classes as students cannot understand different words, idioms or paragraphs fully in English which seems to be another challenge for teachers to apply CLT fully in Malaysian secondary schools. At the end of the study researchers asked participants about this point that whether they encourage students to speak English outside of the classroom or not and most of the participants mentioned that they try their best in order to encourage their students to speak with each other or with their family and friends in English. As Malaysia is a touristy country students need to have good command of English to speak with foreigners, furthermore in the global village it seems essential to have good command of spoken and written of English because of the increasing number of web-based facilities.

5. Conclusion & Future recommendations

From the above discussion we can make conclusion that although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been recognized as an effective method in language teaching and learning but still it seems difficult to apply this method in an ESL context like Malaysia. If we focus on teachers' attitudes regarding their perceptions and implementation of CLT in Malaysian secondary school we can see that although teachers believe on this method and they try their best to apply this method in their classes but still they have some problems. We can name some problems like lack facilities in the Malaysian secondary school as they need to apply authentic tasks which relates to the students' real life situations, but they were not satisfied with the school facilities. On the other hand most of the teachers didn't agree with some principles of CLT and they believed that still CLT principles cannot be applied in the secondary schools properly. In this research, researchers used interview protocol in general and semi-structured interview (in semi-structured interview researchers felt free to ask some unpredictable questions and respondents could go further to details) in advance to elicit teachers' ideas about CLT in Malaysian context.

When researchers asked respondents about some CLT characteristics like teaching grammar implicitly versus explicitly or avoiding translation and focusing on fluency rather than accuracy, most of the teachers expressed their unfavorable attitudes regarding the mentioned items as discussed in the previous sections. As Malaysia is a multicultural society with three main races namely Malay, Chinese and Indian, most of the participants mentioned it seems difficult to work with students with different L1 backgrounds without any translation and it seems very important to apply translation in the secondary school classes. Also they mentioned that if the focus goes to fluency rather than accuracy students' errors and mistakes will be fossilized in their minds. Most of the respondents believed that still it is a big need to teach grammar in an explicit manner rather than in an implicit one, as students in the secondary schools are weak in English and cannot comprehend rules of grammar and sentence structure without explicit elaboration. At the end of study researchers became to the conclusion that CLT is an appropriate and favorable method of language teaching in Malaysian secondary schools but it should be adopted to a context of Malaysia, in a way that some useful techniques of this approach may be combined by some techniques(translation & explicit grammar teaching) of other old approaches of language teaching like Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to be applied in the mentioned classes. Participant's believed that still using explicit grammar instruction and translation which exists in the techniques of GTM can help them to teach better. Hopefully results of this study are useful for a number of people who can benefit from these research findings. Firstly teachers who could reflect their ideas and challenges in applying CLT in Malaysian secondary schools, secondly administrative executers in the ministry of education of Malaysia who can benefit the results and use them to revise related curriculum and use the findings for in-service training classes and finally textbook designers to know teachers' ideas about CLT features and adopting textbooks according to the teachers' needs.

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