

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT): ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO MALAYSIAN ESL PRIMARY LEARNERS

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is seen to be a potential approach to language teaching as it focuses on developing pupil's communicative skills in the target language in meaningful contexts especially when the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been officially introduced in Malaysian primary and secondary education since 2013. However, after six years of learning English through CLT, primary school pupils' English proficiency level is still below par. Therefore, this survey research was embarked, with the aim to investigate the implementation of CLT in the teaching of English lessons among Primary School ESL teachers in Malaysia focusing on the issues/challenges faced by the teachers, teachers' level of understanding and level of CLT implementation at school. Based on the research framework, questionnaire was developed to measure: (i) issues or challenges (ii) level of understanding (iii) the implementation of CLT in the classroom context. Data was collected from 90 Primary School ESL teachers from three different states in Malaysia and analysed descriptively and inferential analysis. Standard deviation was used to identify the issues/challenges faced with moderate result; 0.42 and the overall ESL teachers' level of understanding also shows moderate interpretation which is 0.45. As for the level of CLT implementation in the classroom context, its implementation contributed to high interpretation which is 0.21. The overall findings from this study revealed that; most primary school ESL teachers face some issues/challenges during its implementation in ESL primary school context. Based on the findings, it suggested that by overcoming the issues/challenges,

ESL teachers and pupils can fully benefit from CLT in the English language lessons, thus helping the ESL pupils to acquire better communication skills and improve their proficiency level.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching(CLT), ESL teachers, ESL learners, primary school, communicative skills

Introduction

In Malaysian education system, English has been a compulsory subject at all levels of education; primary, secondary, and even at the tertiary level, alongside other subjects or courses. The teaching and learning process of English subject as a second language has seen countless of approaches, methods and strategies being introduced, used, adopted and adapted as well as implemented to further improve the traditional way of learning process of acquiring the second language among the Malaysian non-native speakers. However, despite learning the language for six years at the primary school level and another five years at the secondary level, Malaysian learners' English proficiency level is still below par and a lot more to be improved. In fact, high number of local graduates are still unemployed due to their poor command of English and lack of communication skills. As supported in The Star (2019), our local graduates did not equip themselves in mastering the use of English to have good ability to converse in the desired language.

In 2013, the language council eventually put forward the idea of adopting Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for the country's education. It has successfully been implemented in primary and secondary schools in 2016. One of the ultimate purpose of this is to ensure that every student in Malaysia is proficient in the English language. The curriculum also identifies five main communication skills such as listening, reading, writing, , spoken interaction as well as spoken production-CLT. The shifting of the KBSR curriculum to KSSR and then followed by the current CEFR curriculum for English subject that officially took place in the midst of 2017, aims at catering the needs of the global industries where most of them demanded for learners who can converse and communicate well in English since early age. The CLT syllabus is expected to be carried out by the ESL teachers in the classroom in order to improve our local learners' communication skills and meet the industries' expectations. Therefore, there is a need to investigate (i) the common issues faced by the

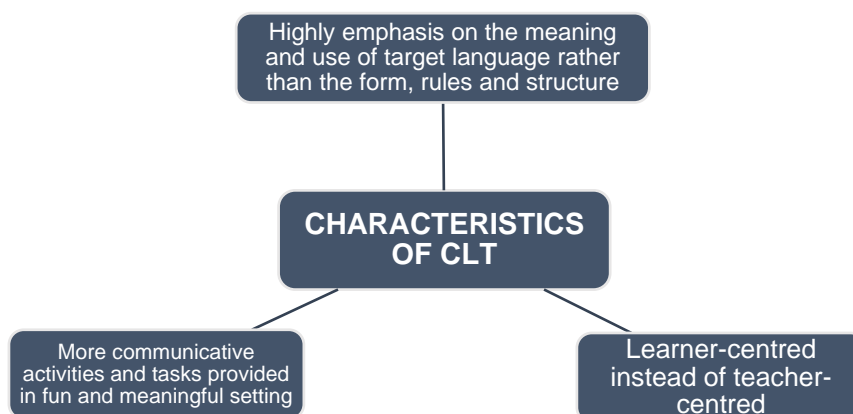
teachers in implementing CLT at primary school settings, (ii) the teachers' level of understanding of CLT from their own perspective and (iii) the level of CLT implementation in ESL classroom at primary schools.

The present research is vitally important as it provides insightful information to English language teachers regarding CLT as an approach to be used in the ESL classrooms in order to enhance oral competency among primary ESL pupils. In line with the aim of English language curriculum proposed by the Ministry of Education, in producing competent bilinguals' generations, therefore, the teachers now hold vital responsibilities to ensure that young learners as young as 7 years old will be equipped with the right communicative skills before they leave for secondary education. It is highly hoped that through this research, the Communicative English approach in the primary school level can be evaluated and decided whether it is really helpful in preparing the pupils to reach the global education standard.

Literature Review

Definition and Principles of CLT

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a broadly used approach in teaching language especially English. According to Prasad (2013), CLT is a teaching technique for teaching a second language emphasises on the importance of learners' ability to be as interactive and expressive with their personal ideas in the desired or targeted language. CLT also highlights on developing learner's communication skills (Larsen-Freeman 2000; Lindsay and Knight 2006; Nguyen 2010). In current era, communication and social skill and ability are essential in daily life. The communicative approach asserts that a foreign language should not only focus on any language structures (vocabulary and grammar) but also on the appropriate communicative purposes that the language performs. As supported by (Littlewood 1981), language learners should learn the connections between the structures and the communicative purposes in real situations and real time.



Communicative Competence and CLT

The main purpose of CLT is communication and interaction between learners in the classroom and between learners and the teachers that will encourage learners to fully utilise or use the learning skills which are speaking and listening. In the early 60s, CLT was widely used because many scholars back then did not favour the traditional rote learning due to the ineffectiveness. CLT is an established method that concentrates on getting the learners to make full use of the language such as to express ideas or concepts and also to carry out various meaningful conversation and interaction with others. That is why, CLT is widely used and favoured by scholars up until now. (Sreehari 2012). Learning English as a second language might not be easy in certain areas in Malaysia. That is why, CLT approach was encouraged to be used in the English language learning process because it gets the learners engaged in the teaching and learning process without focusing too much on the grammatical aspects; accuracy. Thus, it can be said that CLT encourages teachers to introduce and prepare activities or tasks which allow genuine interactions (Brown, 1994).

The Implementation of CLT in Malaysia

The latest Malaysian primary school syllabus emphasises on the four main skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing and not to forget the importance of language contents like grammar, phonics and acquisition of vocabulary through the introduction of CLT into English Language Teaching. However, despite all these, Malaysian ESL learners still have problems in conversing in English even after 6 years of learning English for primary school pupils, 11 years of learning English for secondary school students and 15 years of learning English for tertiary education graduates. Approaches and strategies have been created and

adopted to advocate learner-centred system in Malaysian classrooms, in hope that it could bring greater competency in the language starting from age-7 in primary schools.

Issues and Challenges in Implementing CLT in ESL Classroom

The main purpose of carrying out CLT is for the learners to be able to use English as Second Language for different purposes. Even so, there are also many research identified the problems that hinder the implementation of CLT:

-Large class size

Many researchers agreed that large class size is one of the contributing problems in CLT (Anderson 1993; Li 1998; Littlewood 2007; Liao 2003; Suhaily Abdullah & Faizah Abd Majid 2013). Besides that, Butler (2011) also stated that large number of pupils in Asian classrooms caused difficulties for the teachers to monitor their pupils' behaviour in the tasks assigned throughout the learning process. This leads to failure to make sure everyone is listening to the teacher's instruction even the simplest English instruction was used because they tend to use their mother tongue when discussing about the given tasks or things that are not related to the lesson.

-Mixed abilities groups

Recent years, schools are not allowed to do class-streaming among the learners; thus, mixed abilities classrooms are practised in Malaysia. There are positive and negative sides of this strategy. Baker (2006) argued that it is not about numbers of students in a class, but about having so many different ability levels that provides biggest challenge. She further claimed that in mixed-ability classes it can be hard to keep track and attention to all learners. Learners might have their own way of learning, and the weaker ones probably would have difficulties working in a communicative, noisy atmosphere since they are usually more easily distracted ones. Thus, their motivation in communicative, interactive and active classroom can be so poor and teachers too can be affected; to easily get frustrated because he or she does not have enough time to attend the weaker learners.

-Fluency vs accuracy

CLT was criticised by many about how it leads to the production of fluent learners but inaccurate. Fluency happens because speakers are mostly engaged in a meaningful communication and they are able to maintain a comprehensible and ongoing communication (Richard 1996). This is supported by Hughes (1983) who stated that priority in CLT is given to fluency over accuracy. That is why, error correction is not recommended and has no significant place in teaching and learning process. Thus, teachers who play the role as facilitator will just let the learners engaged in the communicative tasks and never disrupt or correct the learners' mistake during the process. During CLT lessons; which speaking and listening skills are integrated, minimal error correction is encouraged to be practiced and thus may encourage the teachers to not correct the learners' mistakes at all and just focus on the learners' fluency rather than accuracy.

-Pupils' ESL Proficiency Level

English language proficiency among the local learners is another issue highlighted based on the past researches. Shabnam (2012) concluded in her research that low English proficiency level is one of the issues in CLT implementation in Bangladesh. However, she mentioned that the teachers involved in the study did not see this as a big issue. That is why, this research is carried out to investigate if this problem hinders the implementation of CLT. Meanwhile in Bakhtiarvand (2011) study, it was reported there that pupils who lack of English proficiency level faced difficulties in delivering their ideas, thus, hindering them from improving their English language skills. This can be related to Malaysian ESL primary school pupils who are learning English where CLT is being integrated. This research will help future researchers to identify and investigate further if primary school pupils who have low level English proficiency affect the implementation of CLT.

-Teacher's Language Competency

According to Nishino and Watanabe (2008), the lack of sufficient teacher training in CLT has also caused problem in its implementation in the classrooms. According to the two researchers again, some of the teachers were not competent or confident in their ability to speak in English, thus disabling them to conduct effective communicative tasks. Meanwhile in another research conducted on Japanese English teachers, the findings indicated that less than 50% of the teachers met the national anticipated level. Training is very important as it equips the teachers to be competent to teach the learners. A research carried out by Chang (2011) agreed that

training is an important factor in making sure full implementation of CLT in the classroom. Furthermore, many previous researches have proved that there are a large number of Malaysian ESL teachers are still not proficient to teach English. According to the former Deputy Education Minister P Kamalanathan, there are around 15,000 out of 60,000 Malaysia English teachers are not adequately equipped and competent to teach the subject (The Star 2014).

Methodology

In order to accomplish the objectives of this study, a survey research design was employed. The research design of this study collected data and information based on questionnaire conducted on 90 primary school ESL teachers teaching in different states of Malaysia. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from Abdul Malik Ahmad (2008) to collect data from his research on English teachers in Bengkalis, Riau. The main focus of this survey questionnaire was to assess teachers' response towards the implication of CLT in teaching and learning process at primary school level.

The quantitative approach of using a survey provided answers to the three research questions. The questionnaire serves as the main research instruments for this study. It is able to produce the desired results and it is both convenient and cost-effective. It also can be conducted within the time allocated for this study and is very obtainable. The data collected was then analysed in depth to determine the relationship with the main purpose of CLT and whether it really helps in improving the quality of English language of Malaysian primary schoolers.

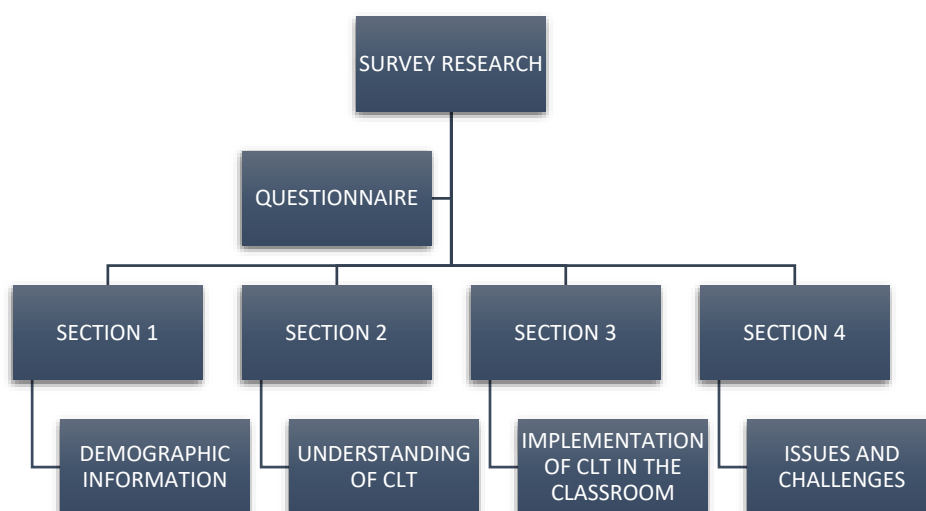


Figure 1: Structure of research instruments

Section 1: Demographic Information

This section required the respondents' demographic data such as gender, educational background and teaching experience. The variety requirement in the demographic information gave a better view of the research as it encompasses the true setting of CLT in Malaysian primary schools that practice English as second language. Moreover, the respondents were also asked about the classroom information such as number of students in their classes, their teaching experience in teaching English as well as their students' level of proficiency.

Section 2: Understanding of CLT

Items in this section were meant to elicit data based on the teachers' understanding of CLT principles. The four items were designed using five point Likert scale. All of the items in this section were adapted from Abdul Malik Ahmad (2008) with some minor changes. Among the adaptations made were the items reconstructed to suit the primary school's context apart from simplifying the questions to ensure it does not burden the teachers who are already busy with school tasks.

Section 3: Implementation of CLT in the classroom

Section three was adapted to elicit data based on the implementation of CLT in the English classes at primary schools. The main aim is to identify what are the CLT activities conducted by the ESL teachers in their class. The questions required the respondents to rate the frequency of the implementation with never, rarely, sometimes, often and always.

Section 4: Issues or challenges

Items in this section were used to obtain data based on the teachers' experience in the implementation of CLT in ESL classrooms. The questions in this section revealed the issues or challenges faced by the teachers in conducting CLT in their classes. This sections required the research respondents to rate their response based on strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree.

Respondents

In order to ascertain the respondents selected to represent the research population, purposive sampling was used to choose the English language teachers involved in this study. The respondents for this study were 90 English teachers teaching in different states of Malaysia. The researcher chose the selected schools with intention to get the feedback from the teachers who had taught English especially after the implementation of CEFR curriculum. The number of teachers for the respondents will be sufficient enough to answer the questions pertaining to Communicative Language Teaching in primary school context. According to Syed Arabi Idid (1998); Wimmer & Dominic (1997), although the fact that the findings obtained from the purposive sampling did not represent all Malaysian primary school English teachers population, but It can be used to give overall picture of the research field.

Research site

For the purpose of this study, the researcher have chosen three different states to be involved; Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. The main purpose of selecting these three states is because it is convenient to the researcher, and the researcher has connection from the selected schools from each state.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to obtain validity and reliability of the items in the questionnaire. The pilot study was carried out in order to test the respondents' understanding of the structure of the sentences and the items in the questionnaire. Apart from that, it was also carried out to identify any possible problem before the real research was carried out. This is also supported by Adibah and Fatimah Harlina (2010) which mentioned that a pilot study is used to determine whether the questions in the questionnaire should be maintained or amended in order to answer all of the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

The results from the questionnaires revealed that most ESL primary school teachers have moderate level of understanding about CLT which means most of them know what CLT is all about and the concept that lies in it. Besides that, it showed that overall Malaysian ESL primary school teachers are able to implement CLT in their ESL classrooms.

However, as for the issues or challenges, the findings revealed that the ESL teachers face moderate issues or challenges in implementing CLT in Malaysian primary schools. Among the main issues or challenges are the large number of enrolment of pupils in the classrooms, the pupils mostly easily feel embarrassed to make mistakes, hesitancy to give their opinion for being considered wrong, pupils worry too much about their grammar mistakes and the repetition of assessments and tasks.

The issues and challenges	OVERALL	3.43	0.42	Moderate
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Table 1a shows the overall data related to the issues and the challenges with the mean score 3.43 and standard deviation 0.42.

In order to explain the findings for this research objectives, the questionnaires' results are put into four themes as below:

(i) Pupils' Level of English Proficiency Are Low

Almost all ESL teachers agreed that the primary school pupils regardless of the areas (urban or outskirt) still struggling with English language; in other words, have low-level of English proficiency. Other than that, the latest national examination (UPSR) results also supported this finding as although English subjects recorded improvement in the overall result, but it is still below satisfactory level. Thus, it can be said that Malaysian ESL primary school pupils' proficiency level is still low and this actually hinders the success of Communicative English teaching and learning in the classroom.

(ii) Pupils' Hesitancy to Speak the target language

Most ESL teachers involved in the study agreed that pupils often hesitate or do not have high self-confidence to voice out their own opinion, share ideas and contribute in discussions because they feel are too anxious to make mistakes in front of the peers and be considered wrong. Also, pupils are afraid of being called as not clever or they are not smart for not mastering the second language yet. And lastly, according to the ESL teachers, almost all ESL pupils are afraid to express themselves during English lessons because they mostly could not find the right words in English; afraid they would be laughed at if they said the wrong words. Hence,

pupils' hesitancy to speak the language and this could actually affect the use and implementation of CLT in English teaching and learning processes

(iii) Large Class Size and Enrolment

Most teachers stand that Malaysian classrooms are too big and in order to have an effective communicative activity, there should be fewer pupils so that they can have more practices and be given maximal opportunities and teachers could attend each one of them and assisting the activities more conveniently. Generally, when pupils do not get proper attention and assistance from the teacher, the communicative activities' objectives can hardly be achieved.

(iv) Passive Learning Style

From the findings, the ESL teachers agreed that pupils chose to speak in their mother tongue rather than take the opportunities during English lessons to use and speak the language. This is due to the limitation of vocabulary and lack of confidence in using the language in different situations or context. One of the causes of this issue is that teachers use teacher-centred approach in the classroom where pupils look upon a teacher as the person who tells them what to do and what not to do (Fauziah Ahmad, Parilah Mohd Shah, Samsuddeen Abdul Aziz, 2005). In the long run, pupils may have become passive and rely on teachers completely throughout the learning session.

Overall, based on the findings collected and analysed from the questionnaire, the ESL primary school teachers do face common issues or challenges in implementing CLT in English classroom. It can be seen above that ESL teachers faced most issues or challenges from the pupils rather than the teachers themselves or from the school.

As for the relation between ESL primary school teachers' understanding about CLT based on the discipline of highest degree earned and teaching experiences, the findings revealed that there are no significance differences on the ESL teachers understanding about CLT, the level of CLT implementation and the issues of challenges based on the discipline of highest degree earned and teaching experiences. Even is that so, the findings revealed that there is an impact of interaction between highest degree earned and teaching experience on the issues or challenges faced by the ESL teachers in the implementation of CLT.

(v) Other Issues or Challenges

Other than the issues or challenges discussed, most respondent-teachers also agreed that they do not have enough time to develop materials for their communicative based lessons. This is due to another responsibility to cover; because apart from teaching, teachers are also burdened with clerical duties (APDM, pupils’ medical records, on-going PBD records) be a facilitator, motivator, planner, advisor, curriculum advisor or club leaders, sports coaches, manage pupils’ data, manage pupils’ discipline and many more. These many responsibilities give negative impacts to the teachers and also affect the quality of teaching and learning process because the allotted time to make the necessary preparations for the fun and meaningful lesson were spent for all the clerical tasks that have been mentioned above.

Also, this finding of the data collected indicated that ESL teachers actually agreed that the repetition of the assessments affected the use of CLT; repeating the same boring activities and assessments could be the reason why pupils often have less interest to acquire the language. This will actually hinder the opportunities for the pupils to experience real-life and natural communication with each other.

Ho1a	No significant differences on ESL teachers’ understanding about CLT, level of CLT implementation and the issues or challenges based on the discipline of highest degree earned.
Ho1b	No significant differences on ESL teachers’ understanding about CLT, level of CLT implementation and the issues or challenges based on teaching experiences.
Ho1c	No interaction-impact between the discipline of highest degree earned of the ESL teachers and their teaching experiences on teachers’ understanding about CLT, level of CLT implementation and the issues or challenges.

Table 1c shows the results of significant differences on ESL teachers’ understanding of CLT, level of CLT implementation and the issues or challenges based on the discipline of highest degree earned and teaching experience

Based on these clear findings, it can be summarised that quite high number of ESL primary school teachers have moderate understanding of CLT. Yet, they still have high implementation of CLT in their ESL teaching and learning sessions.

Suggestions for future research

Based on the findings as well as limitations of the study, the researcher has concluded that there are a few recommendations that could be made for future research. The recommendations are offered in the following:

- (i) In order to make generalisations applicable to all ESL primary school teachers, this study could be conducted using respondents from all 14 states in Malaysia.
- (ii) It would be interesting to find out if there were any significant differences of mismatch between teachers and pupils' perception in this area of study.
- (iii) All of the shortcomings faced in this study can be used as guidelines to improve the methodology in the future research. This research can be considered as a stepping stone to a more detailed, in depth research which can contribute to a new knowledge in this field.

Conclusion

There are a lot of other contributing factors towards language learning in classrooms. CLT is one of the thousand ways to learn a language in the 21st century era. This study suggests that ESL primary school teachers should be made aware of every individual pupils' needs and thus need to start helping them to improve the English language proficiency. It is crucial to identify the Malaysian ESL primary school teachers in the understanding of CLT, the level of CLT implementation and the issues or challenges faced along the way in producing quality and successful communicative young generations. The results in general demonstrated high implementation of CLT among ESL primary school teachers even though they face some issues or challenges. Many studies have been carried out on the effectiveness and the weaknesses of CLT at primary school levels in other foreign countries but not in Malaysia itself. Even some of the researches mentioned some mismatch and the lack of implementation of CLT in the classroom, the research findings revealed that ESL primary

school teachers have good understanding about CLT and they have the basic idea on how CLT should be practiced and implemented in the classroom.

Therefore, if the issues highlighted in this study can be solved, this will really benefit the young generations the most as it is in line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint which aims to produce generations that are able to communicate well either in their mother tongue or the second language.

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