

# TEACHERS' DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) AT HIGH SCHOOLS IN MEDAN

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**Abstract:** This study was intended to find out whether high school English teachers are at ease when using CLT in their classes. That is, whether EFL teachers are capable of utilizing comprehensive approach named CLT in their classes to achieve its ultimate goal, communication in real context. 50 participant teachers teaching English at high schools were given a questionnaire to express their view points about the probable difficulties they might encounter when using CLT. In addition to the questionnaire, each teacher was interviewed for about 5 minutes so they might express their ideas live on the probable constraints in applying CLT in their genuine classes. Then the data collected by means of the interview and the questionnaires were analyzed. It was concluded that the main sources of problems in CLT implementation by the English teachers are: problems caused by the teachers, difficulties coming from the students, pitfalls created by the educational system, and hurdles caused by the CLT approach itself.

**Keywords:** *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*

The history of language teaching has been characterized by a search for more effective ways of teaching second or foreign languages. For more than a hundred years, debate and discussion within the teaching profession have often centered on issues such as roles of grammar in language curriculum, the development of accuracy and fluency in teaching, teaching productive or receptive skills, motivating learners and the role of materials and technology (to name only a few hotly debated issues). Based on many debates and discussions raised about the nature of language learning and teaching over the years one can obviously perceive the complex nature of language learning and teaching in turn.

One good indication of this is the emergence of different "isms" over nearly each one or two decades in the history of language learning and teaching. To cut it short so far researchers can not propose a method of language teaching as the mere panacea to solve all the problems in the field. However, the most comprehensive language teaching approach is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Based on Richards (2001:155) both American and British proponents now see it as the most comprehensive approach and a method that aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. Its comprehensiveness thus makes it different in scope and status from any of the other approaches or methods known so far.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), also known as the Communicative Approach, emerged in Europe and the USA in the 1970s. In the late twentieth century, it became the dominant paradigm within Western ELT and applied linguistics, so much so, in fact, that to admit to a disbelief in CLT would be regarded as 'heresy' (Brown, 2007). It has as most readers will be aware, been 'exported' and promoted around the world in a variety of cultural and educational contexts and with greater and lesser degrees of success.

The origins of CLT are generally traced to a changing view of language, away from language structures towards language functions and communication, philosophically, the focus on learners as individuals, which we have seen previously within the Direct Method and Humanistic language teaching (Crookes, 2009). CLT also emerged in a period when more people than ever were crossing international borders for work, and had immediate functional language needs.

CLT is in some ways problematic as the term means different things to different people and everyday classroom practices can appear to be quite different when CLT principles are applied in different social and educational contexts. Thus, CLT can be seen as an umbrella term that describes a change in thinking about the goals and processes of classroom language learning (Savignon, 2004) with a number of interpretations of how this might be realized in practice. Key to all strands of CLT, however, is the move from teaching language as individual linguistics structures to teaching people how to use language effectively when communicating, in effect a move from teaching linguistic competence to communicative competence.

Communicative competence essentially suggests that teaching learners to form grammatically correct sentences is not enough, Learners also need to be able to use language appropriately in a variety of contexts (Hymes, 1972). Hence, in essence, the goal of CLT is to teach 'real-life' language. The communicative approach—or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)—is the name which was given to a set of beliefs including not only an examination of what aspects of language to teach, but also a shift in emphasis in how to teach. The "how to teach aspect" of CLT approach based on Harmer (2001:85) is closely related to the idea that language learning will take care of itself and that plentiful exposure to language in use and plenty of opportunities to use it are vitally important for a student's development of knowledge and skill. But this is always easier said than done. Since despite the fact that CLT have now become a generalized "umbrella" term to describe learning sequences which aim to improve the students' abilities to communicate, it has come under severe attack from many fronts.

As it was mentioned, CLT starts with a theory of language as communication, and its ultimate goal is to develop learners' communicative competence. Based on Hewings (2001:150) in CLT, meaning is paramount. According to Larsen- Freeman (2003:131) the most obvious characteristics of CLT is that, almost all that is done with a communicative intent. A number of reports in the literature deal with CLT innovations in EFL contexts. Many have proposed that most EFL teachers have found it difficult to use CLT. For instance, as Burnaby and Sun (1989) found in their research that teachers in China found it difficult to deploy CLT. The constraints cited include the context of the wider curriculum, traditional teaching methods, class size and schedules, resources and equipment, the low status of teachers who teach communicative rather than analytical skills, and English teachers deficiencies in oral English and sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Many other studies and researches have shown that it is not that much easy for the teachers specially the EFL teachers to utilize CLT as an asset to reach the final goal of language teaching in their context with their students. Based on a study that assessed the attitudes of Hong Kong educators toward using CLT in the local context, Chau and Chung (1987) reported that teachers used CLT only sparingly because it required too much preparation time. Since the emergence of CLT the only group of people having difficulty using it are not the teachers. Students are also to be taken into account in this case. Sano et al (1984) point out that the Japanese students studied generally did not feel pressing need to use English, therefore the goal of communicative competence seemed too distant for them. A study conducted in Vietnam identified class size, grammar-based examinations, and lack of exposure to authentic language as constraints on using CLT (Ellis; 1994). As this brief review indicates because of many problems CLT as the most known comprehensive approach in language teaching has proved difficult to be implemented on the part of teachers of English as a Foreign Language.

It has been suggested that many communicative activities are not, in fact, any more 'genuine' than activities out forward by other methods. For example, asking someone to give directions while working in a classroom pair-work activity does not serve any authentic communicative and language are removed from their original context outside the classroom into a learning context, they may become inherently artificial (Widdowson, 1998). Similarly, an over-emphasis on the exchange of messages-any messages- within the classroom may lead to the entail for English language teachers' professional status (Pennycook, 1990: V. Cook, 2008). It's been suggested that CLT is not appropriate for all cultures and contexts (Bax2006), for example where learner autonomy, pair and group-work and less obvious teacher intervention is not part of the educational tradition.

Despite this criticism, however, CLT seems to offer teachers significant alternatives for their everyday teaching practices. Undoubtedly, its conception of language as communicative competence strikes a chord with many teachers and applied linguists, even if the process for achieving this is at time potentially problematic.

According to Harmer (2001:86) CLT is prejudiced in favor of native-speaker teachers by demanding a relatively uncontrolled range of language use on the part of the students, and thus expecting the teachers by demanding them to be able to respond to any and every language problem which may come up. In this paper thus, it was tended to find out whether EFL high school teachers are at ease when using CLT in their classes or not.

Based on the above mentioned facts about CLT, its scope and status CLT has proved difficult to implement in EFL classrooms. For this reason the researchers undertook a case study of high school English teachers understanding of the uptake of CLT.

## **Methodology**

### ***Population and Sample***

The population in this study was 50 high school English teachers of Private High- Schools in various grades in Medan. 32 male and 18 female subjects ranged from 32 to 48 years in age. Their experience in English teaching varied from 6 to 22 years with an average of over 10 years. At the time of the study, 18 female participants were teaching the high school students in different various grades. This was also the case for the male teachers. The group of teachers filling out the questionnaire were participating in an intact in-service program. So they were not randomly selected, but it was assumed that based on their experience in teaching English as an EFL, they could be representative sample of the EFL teachers teaching in the same context. Based on the researchers' familiarity with most of these teachers were mostly among the more successful teachers in their classes.

### ***Instruments***

In order to tap these teachers' personal view points about the probable problems they might have experienced using CLT in their real classes first a written questionnaire was used. This questionnaire included both open-ended questions and questions with fixed alternatives. Each participant was required to give his personal ideas in the form of responses to the open-ended questions and choose either "yes" or "no" for the fixed response questions. The participants were also required to be interviewed on the part of the researcher. The questionnaire used in the study has been developed and pilot studied for issues of reliability and validity on the part of Defeng Li (2001). The interviews were conducted in a systematic and consistent order but letting researchers as the interviewers have sufficient freedom to digress and probe far beyond the answers to the prepared and standardized questions in the questionnaire.

### ***Data collection procedure***

To collect the empirical data necessary for this study a questionnaire was distributed among the 50 teachers participating in the research. They provided both open answers and alternative answers to the open ended and "yes", "no" questions respectively. Then, to hear their personal views the researcher asked each one to have a 5 minute interview.

The data obtained both from the written questionnaires and the oral interviews were carefully analyzed. Since data analysis is not a simple description of the data collected but a process by which the researcher can bring interpretation to the data, the themes and coding categories in this study emerged from an examination of the data rather than been determined before hand and imposed on the data.

## **Results and Discussion**

The problems in using CLT reported by participant teachers in this study fall into four types: Some may be caused by the teacher. Some others may be created by the students. The third class may come on the part of the educational system. The last but not the least problems might probably be caused by CLT itself.

### ***Problems on the part of CLT teacher***

- 1 Lack of training in CLT
- 2 Misconceptions about CLT.
- 3 Deficiency in spoken English.
- 4 Few chances for retraining in CLT.
- 5 Deficiency in sociolinguistic and strategic competence.
- 6 Lack of enough time for materials development for communicative class

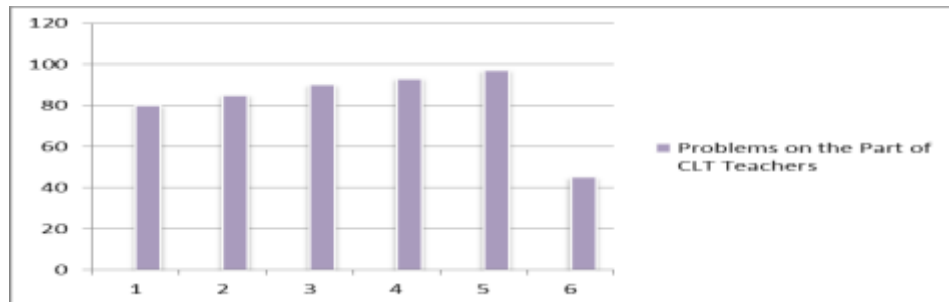
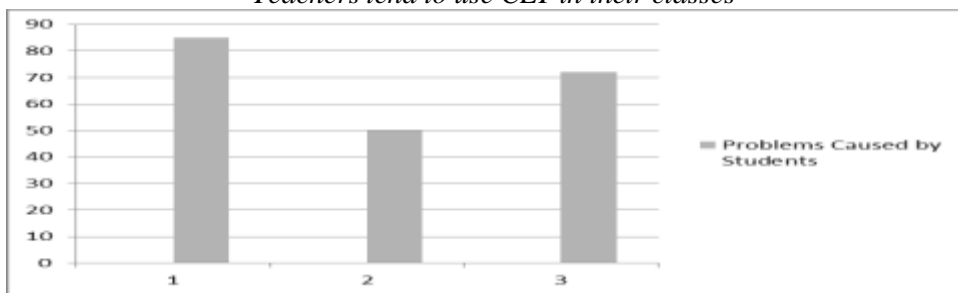


Figure 1: The percentage of teachers' views on problems raised on the part of EFL Teachers in using CLT in their real classes mentioned above

**Problems caused by the students**

- 1 Low English proficiency.
- 2 Resistance to class participation.
- 3 Lack of motivation for communication.

Figure 2: The percentage of teachers' views on problems caused by the students when EFL Teachers tend to use CLT in their classes



**Educational problems**

- 1 Lack of budget.
- 2 Crowded classes.
- 3 Insufficiency of support.
- 4 Grammar-focused exams.

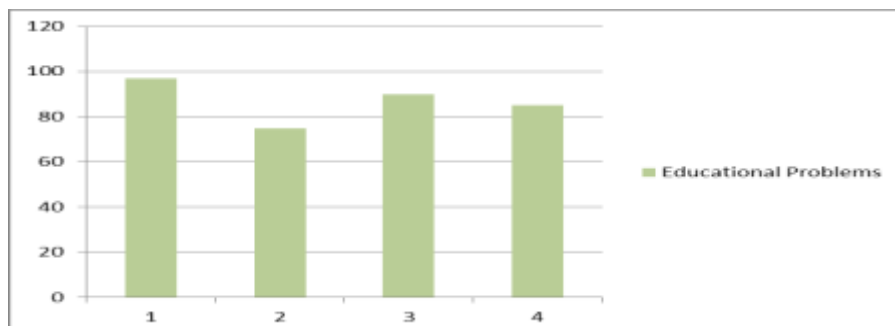
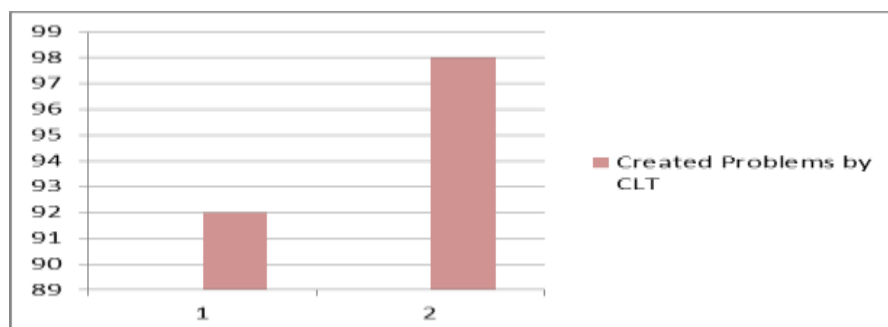


Figure 3: The percentage of teachers' views on Educational problems when EFL Teachers tend to utilize CLT in their actual classes

### *Created problems by CLT*

- 1 Lack of efficient assessment instruments.
- 2 Inadequate account of EFL teaching in CLT.



*Figure 4: The percentage of teachers' views on created problems by CLT itself when EFL Teachers are going to apply CLT*

The number of times the research subjects reoffered to a theme in either the questionnaire or the interview as a limitation in CLT implementation in their own classes is to be taken into account. The maximum number of mentions possible for each of the themes involved in the four main types of problems is 48 out of 50 participants considered that their own deficiency in oral English constrained them in using CLT in their classes. Generally, it seems that one of the important requirements on the part of the teachers intending to use CLT is a good command of spoken English. Although the teachers felt that they were highly proficient in English grammar, writing, and reading, almost all of them reported that their inadequate abilities in spoken English did not let them conduct the communicative classes essentially involved in CLT.

All participants reported that their insufficient strategic and sociolinguistic competence in using English for real communication to achieve genuine purposes in real context would inhibit their use of CLT. This is because of the fact that in CLT classes greater emphasis is given to strategic and sociolinguistic competence than in traditional grammar or structure focused classes. That is to say; being capable enough in application of these two communicative competences is a must to be able to communicate in real context for real purposes.

45 out of 50 subjects also reported that one of the main problems in utilizing CLT on the part of them is lack of enough training in CLT. Most of them told that they had heard only the name of CLT and few of them reported that they have studied some chapters on CLT but that is only in the books. It seems that this lack of systematic training in CLT led to a sketchy and fragmental understanding of CLT and made it unsafe for the instructors, to leave the security of the traditional methods and take the risk of trying a new unfamiliar method.

47 respondents referred to teacher's misconceptions about CLT as one of the principal roadblocks. A usual misunderstanding was that by focusing on appropriateness and fluency, CLT does not teach form at all and thus neglects accuracy. But based on many experts in the field of language teaching in CLT both fluency and accuracy receive emphasis. From among all these Larsen–freeman's conception worth mentioning as she points out that a CLT teacher evaluates not only the students' accuracy but also their fluency (Freeman; 2003:132). Many teachers probably think that CLT does not teach grammar and only teaches speaking. Such misunderstanding led teachers to believe that CLT contradicted their beliefs about language learning and did not allow them to prepare students for the various exams that are of crucial importance to their future careers.

Almost all English textbooks available (before the publication of the new series of text books accompanying publications of the communicative curricula) had been developed under the influence of the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. So teachers had to write their own materials and design their own activities if they wanted to use CLT. English teachers and textbooks are not also exceptions. 44 out of 50 underpaid and over worked teachers as participants of this study complained about the lack of time and expertise in designing communicative activities.

All 50 teachers reported that one main problem preventing them from applying Communicative Language Teaching was their students' low proficiency in English. Students do not start learning English until after the five years period of elementary school (Grade one junior high school), and they have only one or two 90 minute English classes per week and this makes progress slow. They usually suffer from their small English vocabulary and little command of English structures. Since the students do not often have the necessary proficiency in English, all participant teachers found it difficult to do any oral communicative activities with them.

For this most participants expressed their view points as such; because the average secondary school students have a very small English vocabulary, and they know limited number of English structures, they have great difficulty expressing themselves in English when they are required to participate in genuine communicative exchanges. Gradually they lose interest in trying to speak English and become too discouraged to speak English any more.

Nineteen out of twenty teachers recognized the lack of motivation on the part of the students to work on their communicative competence as a great hindrance. Though a large number of people including students in our country have a great inclination to learn to express themselves in oral English, most of the participants reported that since their students' goal is to enter the university, they prefer to work on English grammar and vocabulary. This might be the case because in the national university Entrance Exam at school the part dealing with English is heavily based on grammar and lexis. "Because of the fact that grammar and lexis in isolation (in the form of discrete multiple choice test items) still play a decisive role in all English examinations in our country, teachers who teach communicative competence are not liked as well as those who teach grammar and lexis in isolation".(The idea was expressed by one of the participant teachers in this study).

47 out of 50 respondents believed that the students' resistance to class participation was one of the primary constraints in trying to use CLT. Believe it or not almost all of us are the product of traditional classroom structures; that is, we have mostly been brought up in teacher fronted classes. That is why; it proves a bit difficult to bring up our students while giving them ample opportunities to be active participants in real communicative activities. "Well, paragraphs, pages, chapters and even books have been written down on the importance of student centered classes but it seems that we teachers are still the class dictators" one of the respondents said. However; one main feature of CLT according to Richards (2001:168) is that it requires teachers to acquire less teacher-centered classroom management skills.

Communicative Language Teaching has proved to be more successful in small classes. That is why people like Richards (2001:168) also clearly state that there must at most be 12 students in a CLT class. This might be necessary to give everyone in the class more time and opportunities to participate in real communication activities. Unfortunately, no one of the participant teachers claimed to have English classes with less than 25 students in. And this they believed makes the job even thornier.

As it was previously mentioned most of our English examinations are grammar and lexis based. The biggest of these life procedure determinant exams is the National University Exam given to the students each year. Based on this fact most of the subjects (48 out of 50) believed that, they are under the pressure to make their pupils do well on such tests, often devoting valuable class time to teaching test-taking skills and drilling students on multiple-choice items. Based on the above mentioned fact the reader can judge how our teachers are under sever constraints in CLT application.

Lack of enough funding was also mentioned as a great limitation in CLT utilization (44 out of 50 teachers reported this). Obviously CLT needs ideal classes with as less students as possible. It also needs some equipment including a TV set, a computer, and so many other things not to be mentioned here. Some of the teachers believed that it is always more difficult to apply CLT because of the lack of money which is not always there. So "it's much harder than you plan and imagine." one of the respondents said. Teachers are not also supported by each other. 43 respondents also proposed the lack of support as an important limitation to the teachers in CLT application. Teachers generally found this lack of professional, administrative, and collegial support discouraging. That is why they mainly lose hope in dealing with the challenges of introducing CLT in their classes.

CLT does not give a sufficient account of EFL teaching though its initial growth in foreign language teaching accounted for that (Hewing; 2001:160). Obviously EFL is different from ESL. Yes, many people tend to confuse them and often ignore the special elements of EFL. One of the participants in this study rightly said that "because EFL and ESL teaching are different we often find Western language teaching methods difficult to use". The significant difference that almost all the teachers saw between EFL and ESL included the goal of learning English, contextual situation, teachers' command of English proficiency, and the availability of authentic English materials.

Another problem cited on the part of 49 participants in this study as a constraint in using CLT is its lack of effective assessment instruments. Larsen–Freeman (2003:132) when dealing with the evaluation of the CLT students points out that the student who has the most control of the structures and vocabulary is not always the best communicator. That is why she proposes that a teacher can informally evaluate his students' performance in his role as an advisor or co–communicator. She further explains that in order to assess students writing skill, for instance, a teacher might ask them to write a letter to a friend. However, it seems not to be easy to evaluate our students when we use CLT to teach by.

### **Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications**

The aim of the present study was to see if EFL teachers can apply CLT procedures in their EFL teaching context successfully. Based on the findings of this study one can speculate about the perceived difficulties in utilizing CLT demands and what the EFL situation in many countries allows. This contradiction must be resolved before EFL teaching in these countries can benefit from CLT. One good way to do this is that the delivery of EFL methods courses in education programs should change. In this regard, Hewing (2001:161) obviously points out that CLT should not be lectured about but demonstrated. Novice nonnative teachers of English then should have opportunities to go hands–on experience with and gain confidence in using Communicative Language Teaching. In addition despite its initial claim to be appropriate an approach for EFL situation, CLT seems to be more suitable for ESL situations. To indicate this fact Edge (1996:18) points out that it seems necessary that rather than relying on expertise, methodology, and materials controlled and dispensed by Western ESL countries, EFL countries should strive to establish their own research contingents and encourage method specialists and classroom teachers to develop language teaching methods that take into account the political, economic, social, and cultural factors' and most important of all, the EFL situations in their countries. They should also devise teaching methods, appropriate to their learners, their colleagues, and their societies. As it is the case with almost all studies done in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, this study is not free of limitations. That is to say, because of the eluding nature of CLT which is defined differently by different people one cannot claim to provide all inclusive criteria to list the problems with which EFL teachers wish to come to a conclusion in evaluating CLT as an approach in EFL contexts. Therefore, the researchers have not intended to come to an absolute conclusion about the perceived problems with which EFL teachers might face in using CLT in their real classes. It is hoped that this survey be of use for other researchers who are interested in discussing for the same matters. All defects of this paper are of ours. That is, no fault is to the participant teachers in this study.

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