



Are Thailand ready for Communicative Language Teaching?

Miss Phatchara Phantharakphong

TESOL Program Faculty of Education

Khon Kaen University 40002

Richards and Rodgers [5] described Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an approach rather than a method, since it is defined in rather broad terms and represents a philosophy of teaching that is based on communicative language use. CLT has developed from the writing of British applied linguists such as Wilkins, Widdowson, Brumfit, Cardlin and others, as well as American educators such as [6], all of whom emphasize notional-functional concepts and communicative competence, rather than grammatical structures, as central to language teaching. Although the movement first began with reconceptualization of teaching syllabus in notional-functional terms, CLT has broadened to encompass a wide range of principles for developing communicative competence. Some of principles are summarized below.

1. Meaning is of primary important in CLT.
2. Attempts by learners to communicate with the language are encouraged from the beginning of instruction.
3. Sequencing of materials is determined by the content, function, and meaning that will maintain students' interest.
4. Judicious use of the native language is acceptable.

5. Activities and strategies for learning are varied according to learner preferences and needs.

6. Communicative competence with an emphasis on fluency and acceptable language use is the goal of instruction. [2]

Thus, in this approach, learners are more responsible to manage their own learning, and teachers take roles as facilitators of knowledge to help learners how to learn rather than being the source of knowledge as was traditionally the case. Teachers can foster learner autonomy by creating and maintaining a learning environment through communicative tasks through which students can develop their language and learning skills to become autonomous learners.

CLT has served the language teaching profession well for many years. It has had on various aspects on ESL/EFL teaching including syllabi, teaching materials and methodology. However, there has been greater awareness to the limitations of CLT which does not specifically address the needs and concerns of teaching in ESL/EFL situation. The most salient deficiencies relate to the great demands CLT places on teachers in terms of language fluency and competence in communicative methodology.

In many EFL countries in Asia, ministries of education have based teaching objectives on

the general goals of developing communicative abilities. Focusing on Thailand, under the Thai National Education Act (NEA) of B.E. 2542 (1999), the government has recently launched a series of educational reforms with the aim of developing Thailand into a knowledge-based society, which is a pre-requisite for becoming a knowledge-based economy. One of these reforms focuses on the nature of the learning process occurring in all subject areas at all levels of education, and is considered to be the heart of all the changes being implemented. This change requires teachers to change their traditional roles, requiring them to transform themselves from tellers to facilitator and from materials users to teaching materials creators in order to promote learners' constructive self-learning. In regard to Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Thailand, the reform of teaching-learning of English follows the trend in contemporary English language teaching pedagogies which have focused on developing learners' communicative competence and on promoting learning strategies and learner autonomy in language classrooms. The development of communicative approach shifted the attention of the teaching-learning process from language form to language function, or to language use in accordance with the needs of learners [6]. This change in the approach to language teaching from traditional teacher-centered to more learner-centered, which as [4] noted, is "an offspring of communicative language learning" requires learners to participate and negotiate actively in meaningful interaction in order to interpret and construct meaning by themselves [1].

However, not all innovations can be easily applied in every context, and the application of CLT is still controversial in Thai context. Firstly, using communicative methodology in their classes, such

teachers are expected to be highly proficient in the foreign language, well versed in the foreign culture, and adequately competent in communicative teaching techniques. However, the majority of Thai teachers of English lack these abilities. They have learnt English in Thailand and have had only a limited opportunity to experience the use of authentic English in appropriate cultural and social contexts. In addition, many of those teachers were taught English along traditional methodological lines. Indeed, some of those teachers find such communicative tasks as information gap and problem solving difficult for them to do.

Secondly, in Thai context, where there is a shortage of qualified EFL teachers, the new policy has been mandated top-down. Thai EFL teachers who are required to implement this CLT approach find themselves faced with a number of challenges in both the environment in which they work and related to the new goal they are asked to achieve. Traditionally, the Thai educational system had focused on teacher dominated chalk and talk or rote-learning. Students are taught to be passive, obedient and respectful to teachers. Teachers who are the products of the old educational system may find it difficult to manage the role reversal required in the new classroom where learners are the main players. Understandably, most Thai EFL teachers still used the teaching methods they were familiar with, namely, a textbook-based, grammar-translation approach where lessons and tests mostly focus on grammar structure, vocabulary, and reading in order to be prepared for university entrance examinations. If the policy is to be successful, there is an urgent need to investigate the English teachers' capacity to develop learner autonomy through a learner-centered CLT approach. According to the study of learner-centered CLT approach in

teaching English as a foreign language, [3] found that, as to the impact on the teachers themselves, they believed that the reform made them more active in the planning teaching and learning processes. They realized the need to change their role as a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator or a coach to teach their students to think and learn by themselves through a variety of activities and resources. However, they agreed that it was challenging for them to implement this change while inadequate teacher qualifications still remained unchanged. In addition, the teachers regarded language content and language skills as important and tried to teach content and skills in contexts and through communicative activities. However, they believed that they were more confident in teaching language content than communicative activities. These findings indicate that the teachers need more assistance to understand basic concepts in CLT and more practical input in order to increase their confidence in developing communicative activities. This is particularly true for Thai rural contexts where training and resources are likely to be fewer. Teachers need to be given a chance to reflect on how they perceive the system should work and how they implement CLT approach. Although the teachers have positive attitudes towards CLT approach, it was difficult for them to adapt to the new approach requirements as they had not been properly trained.

Therefore, outcomes were dependent on individual teachers' beliefs and understandings and this unavoidably impacted on how the teachers applied the approach to their teaching techniques in their individual contexts. This gap between intent and practice and between knowledge and outcomes is something that teachers, educators and supervisors need to be considered in both pre-service and in-service teacher education if learners' communicative skills and learning strategies are to be improved. Therefore, the most important factors are the readiness of teachers and the availability of resources. Personally, teachers need more time and support to gain insight into this approach in order to develop their teaching skills.

In conclusion, teachers are attempting to implement the new learner-centered approach to CLT required by the 1999 Education Act. However, contextual factors directly impact on the implementation of the learning reform policy that illustrates what may be appropriate to implement in other global contexts, but may not be equally successfully in particular local situations. The fact that the policy has required both teachers and learners to develop new teaching and learning strategies, but has not equipped or supported schools with sufficient facilities, resources and learning environments, thus far has made the policy goals unrealistic and all but impossible to achieve.

References

- [1] Breen, M. P., and Candlin, C. N. (1980). The essentials of a communicative curriculum in Language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 89-112.
- [2] Hadley, A. O. (2001). *Teaching language in context*. (3rd Ed.). Illinois: Heinle & Heinle.
- [3] Nonkhetkhong, K, Baldauf, R. B. and Moni, K. (2006). Learner-centeredness in teaching English as a foreign language. Paper printed at 26 Thai TESOL International Conference, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 19-21 January 2006, 1-9.
- [4] Nunan. D. (1988). *The learner-centered curriculum: a study in second language teaching*. Cambridge/ New York/ Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Savignon, S. J. (1997). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice: Texts and contexts in second language learning*. (2nd Ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.