

## **PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CASE STUDY OF ENGINEERING INSTITUTES IN PUNJAB**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the herald of globalization, English language has established itself as a global passport for professional success. Keeping in view the significant status of India in the current global market, it has become increasingly important for the technically skilled youth to be proficient in English communication. Thus, English language teaching has acquired a crucial role in the technical education system of India. What is required is an appropriate teaching methodology that answers the demands made on the aspiring technocrats by the existing competitive scenario. One such teaching method which has gained immense popularity in the recent past of language teaching practice is Communicative Language Teaching (henceforth CLT) method. The concept of CLT is not new to India but its scope is very limited and this approach is not finding its full expression. Most of the language teachers still have misconceptions about CLT and are unsure about how to implement it in the language classrooms. Thus, through this paper an earnest endeavor has been made to understand the English language teachers' practical understandings of Communicative language teaching in the technical institutes of Punjab, India. A small survey will also be incorporated in the study to substantiate the results.

**KEYWORDS:** Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Contextual Factors, English as Foreign Language (EFL), English Language Teaching (ELT)

### **INTRODUCTION**

This exploratory study investigates teachers' perception about the principles and practice of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the technical institutes through a survey of 63 teachers in the engineering institutes of Punjab. The concept of CLT is not new to India but its effectiveness as an important tool for English Language Teaching needs to be reinforced. Though a majority of language teachers in the technical institutes advocate the implementation of CLT in the ELT classrooms and they profess practice of the same in their classrooms yet there continues to exist a low correlation between what they state and what actually happens in their classroom. Certain obstacles continue to hinder successful implementation of CLT activities in the language classrooms.

Kagan (1992) claimed that most of a teacher's professional knowledge can be regarded as their beliefs. But what shapes teachers' beliefs and practices? Researchers have been focusing on this question since they started regarding teachers as active decision-makers (Freeman, 2002). In the field of English language teaching, this question led me to a narrower inquiry. What shapes teachers' beliefs and practices concerning novel teaching methods: government policy, high-stakes examinations, previous teaching and learning experience, or contextual factors? Listening to teachers' voices can help us better understand the relationships between these contextual factors and teachers' perceptions. Thus, this paper

is an attempt to understand the English language teachers' practical understandings of communicative language teaching and also to analyze those factors that affect its implementation in the language classrooms of the engineering institutes in Punjab, India. The following research questions were posited:

- What are teachers' beliefs about the principles of CLT?
- What is teachers' perception about the practice of CLT in the language classrooms?
- What are the factors which hamper the successful implementation of CLT in the classrooms in the technical institutes in India?

## **MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES**

The instrument used for the survey was a questionnaire consisting of 15 questions grouped into three categories: the background information of respondents, their views about the principles of CLT and their understandings about the practice of CLT in language classrooms. The questionnaire used in this study was based on information gained from the researcher's recent experience teaching in an engineering college and through discussions with fellow colleagues. The questionnaire adapted from Karavas-Doukas (1996) composed of 5-point Likert-type close-ended items.

### **Participants**

A questionnaire was sent along, with a cover letter that explained the purpose of the questionnaire, to 75 randomly selected teachers out of which 63 were returned which shows a response rate of 84 percent. Of the 63 respondents, the majority (65.08 per cent) are female. Majority of the teachers (55.55 per cent) fall under the age slab of 30-39 years. Maximum number of teachers (39. 68 per cent) have reported their teaching experience in the category of 6-10 years. Most of the teachers (88.88 per cent) have reported their weekly teaching load in the category of 16-20 periods. Almost all the teachers (95.24 per cent) have reported the average number of students in one language class to be 51-60.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Questions 7 to 11 concern teachers' views about the principles of CLT. In response to Question 7, 51 out of the 63 teacher participants indicated that they had heard of or studied CLT. However, responses to Question 8 (Table 1) show that the teachers learned about CLT mainly from books and journals, or seminars, workshops and lectures conducted by the college or the University or the AICTE (All India Council of Technical Education). Only 11.11 per cent of the teachers reported learning about CLT from the prescribed curriculum with none of the teachers reported any sort of training (pre-service or in-service) in CLT. One of the reasons for this might be that the prescribed curriculum is not meant to address specific methods of instruction, but rather to describe the overall purpose of English in the technical education.

Also, a negligible 3.17 per cent of the teachers have learned about CLT during their Post-graduate or graduate programs which points towards lack of educational programs based on English language teaching with most of the universities offering courses in literature only.

**Table 1**

Sources from which Teachers' Heard /Learned about CLT		
Sr. No.	Sources	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (in per Cent)
1	Books/ Journals	61.90
2	Seminars/Workshops/Lectures held by college/university/education council	44.44
3	Curriculum	11.11
4	Post graduate or Graduate program	3.17
5	Pre-service/ in-service training	0

**Table 2**

What is CLT		
Sr. No.	Characteristics	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	CLT is student/learner-centered approach	82.54
2	CLT relies heavily on speaking and listening skills	76.19
3	CLT requires a lot of time to prepare class activities	63.49
4	CLT emphasizes fluency over accuracy	55.55
5	CLT requires the teachers to have high proficiency in English	50.79
6	CLT puts too much pressure on teachers	28.57
7	CLT means not teaching grammar	19.05
8	CLT means only group work or pair work	11.11

Responses to questionnaire item 9 indicate teachers' conceptions about general principles of CLT. The items selected most frequently by the teachers as characteristics of CLT include *CLT is student/learner centered approach* and *CLT relies heavily on speaking and listening skills*. The items which were least selected by the teachers as characteristics of CLT include *CLT means only group work and pair work* and *CLT means not teaching grammar*.

The overall response to this question demonstrates that the teachers in this sample have a consistent and generally clear understanding of the attributes of CLT. Although there is consistency in identifying these items as characteristics of communicative language teaching, there are indications of some uncertainties as 42.86 per cent of the teachers identified negatively with the feature *CLT emphasizes fluency over accuracy*. The possible explanation could be that they might have believed that although sometimes fluency has to be given priority over accuracy, to achieve communicative competence, accuracy is equally important. Such an explanation is consistent with Brown, who asserts, "Fluency and accuracy are both important goals to pursue in CLT. While fluency may in many communicative language courses be an initial goal in language teaching, accuracy is achieved to some extent by allowing students to focus on the elements of phonology, grammar, and discourse in their spoken output (2001: 268)".

Some inconsistencies or discrepancies were also found when 28.57 per cent of the teachers responded in favor of the feature *CLT puts too much pressure on teachers* whereas 63.49 per cent of the teachers said that *CLT requires a lot of*

time to prepare CLT activities. It may be that these teachers are aware of the overall effectiveness of the communicative language teaching approach and therefore try to practice communicative activities although it requires a longer time to prepare them.

With regard to the strengths of CLT (Table 3), the teachers rate high its humanistic potentials as in *meaningful language use and fun-oriented*, which are lacking in other English language teaching approaches in particular and our examination-oriented education system in general. As for the weaknesses, *more preparation for teachers* and *more time-consuming* (Table 4) top the list with 88.89 and 85.71 per cent of teacher agreement respectively. This is not surprising because much teacher adaptation and thought are needed in creating a meaningful situation for language use and practice, if a lesson is to be conducted communicatively. The reason is, at present, readily available and usable teaching materials such as supplementary materials are in short supply. Of all weaknesses, discipline problems resulting from student-oriented activities such as group work, pair work and games are also a concern of the majority of teachers.

**Table 3**

The Strengths of CLT		
Sr. No.	Strengths	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	meaningful language use	88.89
2	learning can be more fun	85.71
3	teaching can be more fun	80.95
4	fosters co-operative relationship among students	77.77
5	helps students assert individuality	71.43
6	students more easily motivated	55.55

**Table 4**

Weaknesses of CLT		
Sr. No.	Weaknesses	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	more preparation for teachers	96.83
2	more time-consuming	82.54
3	discipline problems	71.42
4	difficulty in organizing lessons into a communicative syllabus	58.73
5	difficulty in testing students' communicative ability	41.27

Questionnaire items 12 to 15 are based on teachers' perception of CLT practice in their language classrooms. To the answer of question 12 (Table 5), the activities most frequently reported to be used by the teachers in their classrooms include *call on students to orally respond to any issues/topic*, *group discussion*, *grammar exercises and role-play*. These most frequently reported activities are commonly referred to in descriptions of communicative teaching activities. The activities least selected by teachers are - *Translation* and *Reading and reporting from websites*. In the case of the activity *Reading and reporting from website*, only 9.52 per cent of the teachers responded in affirmation. It seems that most of the language teachers are not aware of or comfortable in the use of internet for communicative language teaching purposes or their repertoires of the communicative activities were limited.

Table 5

CLT Activities you Use Frequently in your Class		
Sr. No.	CLT Activities	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	Call on students to orally respond to any issues/topic	74.60
2	Group discussion	68.25
3	Grammar exercises	63.49
4	Role play	58.73
5	Pronunciation drills	55.55
6	Reading and reporting from newspaper	47.61
7	Pair work	33.33
8	Games	23.81
9	Translation	19.05
10	Reading and reporting from websites	9.52

One of the most important and commonly reported used communicative activities in the general literature about CLT is *Games*, which only 23.81 per cent of the teachers reported to have used in their class. It is possible that the teachers are aware of 'Games' as communicative activities but games are not being practiced by them because of physical circumstances, such as large class size, small class hours and discipline problems.

As can be seen, when CLT is found to be suitable for certain topics and when teachers have the time and energy are the most frequent circumstances reported with 93.65 and 82.54 per cent, which again reflects the pragmatic attitude of respondents. But the findings in Table 6 as a whole reveal that communicative language teaching has not taken root in the classroom; teachers use it only sparingly, i.e. when the situation allows for it. The teachers were then asked to rate the difficulties in implementing CLT in their classrooms. As shown in table 7, *large class size* tops the list with almost all the teachers reporting it as a major obstacle in the effective implementation of CLT in the language classrooms. This clearly points to the problems faced by teachers in organizing group-work and pair-work activities which are essential for communicative language teaching. *Faulty examination system* and *faulty syllabus* has also been reported by most of the teachers (85.71 and 84.13 per cent respectively) probably because the current syllabus does not focus on improving or evaluating the communicative development of the students rather it is still revolves around the traditional practices of language teaching.

Table 6

Circumstances under which Teachers Use CLT		
Sr. No.	Circumstances	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	when CLT is found to be suitable for certain topics	93.65
2	when teachers have the time and energy	82.54
3	when student are in a good mood	55.55
4	when students get bored	52.38
5	when teachers are in a good mood	7.94
6	when teachers get bored	6.35

Table 7

Difficulties in Implementing CLT		
Sr. No.	Factors	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	Large class size	92.06
2	Faulty Examination system	85.71
3	Faulty syllabus	84.13
4	Lack of resources/ infrastructure	74.60
5	Lack of training in CLT	66.66
6	Teachers' little time to prepare communicative materials	63.49
7	Students' varied levels of language proficiencies	50.79
8	Low motivated students	39.68

Question 15 was intended to get teachers' opinions about the current English language teaching (ELT) situation in India. The areas in which teachers feel success has been achieved to some extent are- *exams, preparation of ELT teachers, and reading speed*. These are the areas in which teachers feel some success has been achieved may be because these are rather traditional goals and they have lots of experience meeting these goals. Teachers may know what exams are like and they prepare the students very well accordingly.

The areas which are reported by the teachers to be least successful include *vocabulary, oral fluency and effective teaching material*. However, reading comprehension and examinations are reported to be the most successful areas in ELT by 82.54 and 71.43 per cent of the teachers respectively agreeing to them. The obvious reasons for choosing comprehension skills and examinations as the successful areas in ELT could be the emphasis on reading comprehension as per the latest syllabus design and the everlasting importance accorded to 'examination' in the Indian education system. The reason for the students not being successful in fluent communication in English might be teacher centered teaching practice which lacks communicative and social-functional activities in the classrooms.

Table 8

Success Level of the Following Areas of ELT in India		
Sr. No.	Areas of ELT	Proportion of Subjects who Agree (In per Cent)
1	Reading Comprehension	82.54
2	Exams	71.43
3	Preparation of ELT Teachers	57.14
4	Reading Speed	47.62
5	Convenient and Equipped Classroom	39.68
6	Vocabulary	23.81
7	Oral Fluency	15.87
8	Effective Teaching material	7.94

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigates teachers' understandings about the principles and practice of CLT in the engineering institutes in Punjab, India. The participants in this study seemed to have fairly good knowledge of CLT. However, at the same time, their responses imply that there were some problems that negatively affect the implementation of CLT. As is evident from the study, it seems that in order to enable teachers to have a better understanding of CLT, the prescribed curriculum and pre-service and in-service training needs to be reviewed. The study also highlights dearth of

language teaching courses offered by the Universities and the entire emphasis laid on literature studies which obviously reflects in the teaching practices of the teachers. The English language teachers surveyed approve of the potential strengths of CLT, which is probably because of their exposure to the communicative approach through literature, seminars, workshops and other modes of teacher training. However, the teachers also recognize CLT's weaknesses, which must stem from their practical experience.

Although this exploratory study cannot be generalized, the results suggest that for teachers to more effectively use CLT in the classroom, changes in classroom conditions (class size, teaching aids etc) are necessary. As Fang (1996) claimed contextual factors which include classroom conditions can have a powerful impact on teachers and affect their classroom practice. They could maintain better control in a small class while students are doing pair/ or group work, and could guarantee adequate learning. (Holliday, 1994)

The results also show that CLT is beginning to be employed to some extent in the language classrooms but in order to delineate ways to help this small change lead to real English education reform in India (specifically Punjab), a comprehensive investigation of the perception about the principles and practice of a larger number of language teachers is necessary to learn what conditions they really want to change. Li (1998) maintains that teaching methodologies developed in the West, such as CLT, are often difficult to introduce into EFL situations. Holliday (1992) argues that innovation can be effective only if it is appropriate to the actual conditions of host educational institutions. As such, the educational context needs to be taken into consideration while implementing CLT in our (Indian) technical institutes.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This survey is only a pilot study meant to reveal problems; it is by no means definitive. The data was collected from only 63 teachers who were randomly selected to have an initial response on this issue. Furthermore, there was no attempt to tap respondents' thoughts in interviews. This is just an initial step to pave way for further comprehensive research in this front.

In future, further investigation on controlled samples' perception and practice of specific aspects of CLT can be done in order to uncover locally relevant factors which facilitate and/or inhibit the use of the approach. Above all, observations and/or experiments on actual classroom teaching using different communicative techniques are greatly needed if we were to investigate more accurately the use of CLT in the engineering institutes.

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