

# A Study of Thai Teachers' Perceptions Toward the Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching of English

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**Abstract :** *This study explored the perceptions of Thai teachers toward the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching in their English classrooms. Despite the Thai government promoting CLT in English classrooms since the 1990s, Thai teachers still struggle to bring their students to communicative competency. This study interviewed 6 in-service teachers who currently utilizing CLT about their experiences in order to gather insight into the difficulties that many Thai teachers were facing in utilizing this approach to teaching English. These interviews also intended to provide a better understanding of EFL teaching methodology in the Thai classroom and to emphasize the need for EFL teachers in Korea to build students' abilities to communicate in English. The findings of the study were that the subjects found it difficult to use English textbooks to promote communicative competence as the textbooks were not selected with the purpose of setting CLT objectives. Also, teachers often find it difficult to utilize communication oriented activities as they feel burdened to prepare their students, through the teaching linguistic elements of English, for the National Entrance Examination. Furthermore, teachers often feel burdened by large class sizes and do not feel adequately trained to implement Communicative Language Teaching successfully.*

**Keywords:** Communicative language teaching, communicative competence, teachers' perceptions

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## Introduction

This study explores the perceptions of Thai teachers toward the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching. This is a qualitative study meant to focus on the experiences of Thai teachers using CLT. This study looks to gain insight into how CLT is implemented and the difficulties that Thai teachers face when applying CLT in their English classrooms.

From the perspective of facilitating communicative competence in language learning, rather than depending on the audio-lingual method which emphasizes memory and repetition drills, language teachers and researchers look to Communicative Language Teaching as a different way of language learning/teaching. Language is ultimately regarded as communication (Nunan, 1988; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). From this point, the aim of language teaching/learning should be communicative-oriented in order to develop the learner's communicative competence (Wilkins, 1972). Brumfit (1980) also posits that what we are learning is not just stimulus-response relationships, but rather a generative system which helps us negotiate meaning.

Many Asian countries have been employing CLT for decades. The CLT teaching method has been accommodated and adjusted to the language teaching and learning of real situations to promote students' communicative abilities in English. In the same vein, since the 1990s, the Thai government has promoted CLT in English classrooms and focused on learner-centered instruction and the communicative approach. Though CLT has now been a part of English in Thailand for a while, like other Asian countries, there are still many problems in its implementation, namely that it is a far cry from traditional approaches to learning English and that the educational system, teachers, and students are still not accustomed to learning English in this manner.

This study is important for several reasons. First, there is a dearth of research on how Communicative Language Teaching in EFL classrooms in Asia can lead students to gain communicative competency. There has been a shift of emphasis from teaching linguistic elements to teaching appropriate language use in English language teaching (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993). Therefore, Teachers need to provide opportunities for students to practice and use these communication strategies in their teaching (Tarone, 1984).

Despite attempts to help students develop communicative skills, there is still a need for more empirical support to explain how teachers lead students to develop communicative competence in EFL classrooms. To do this, this study attempts to gain a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of communicative learning and teaching through a series of interviews with Thai teachers that are currently utilizing CLT in their classrooms. The questions asked in the interviews were designed to determine: a) whether teachers have a good understanding of how to properly implement Communicative Language Teaching, b) whether they believe Communicative Language Teaching is effective in bringing about communicative competency in English in their students, and c) which teaching model would be best suited for both students and teachers in Asia to meet their unique challenges when employing Communicative Language Teaching.

This study aims to provide a better understanding of EFL teaching methodology in the Thai classroom in order to provide insight for teachers seeking to provide their students with chances to become better communicators in English. This study will look to attain deeper awareness of this need.

Furthermore, this study will look to further emphasize the need for EFL teachers in other English language learning environments to build students' abilities to communicate in English rather than just putting emphasis on the learning of grammar rules and how to translate. This study hopes to offer opportunities to gain deeper knowledge of Communicative Language Teaching that can be put to practical use by other Asian EFL teachers and learners.

## Literature Review

The current trend of second/foreign language teaching emphasizes the development of communicative competence rather than the acquisition of discreet linguistic elements. For this reason, many researchers (Bachman, 1990; Breen and Candlin, 1980; Brown and Yule, 1983; Brumfit, 1980; Canale and Swain, 1980; Candlin, 1976; Hymes, 1972 & 1992; Savignon, 1972 & 1983; Rivers, 1981, 1987; Wilkins, 1972) have concentrated on how ESL students develop communicative competence. These researchers all stress that second/foreign language students are required to practice in order to develop their communicative ability so that they can express themselves appropriately in the situations they come across in the real world.

Candline (1976) notes that we need to understand meaning rather than just grammatical structure. Brown and Yule (1983) also support the idea that the present teaching trend has moved away from the study of form to the study of the meaning of language. In order to have a deeper understanding of communicative language teaching, Nunan (1988) points out that we need to see communicative ability “as being developed through activities which actually simulate target performance” (p. 26). In their lessons, teachers, therefore, are encouraged to select “activities which require learners to do in class what they will have to do outside class,” rather than selecting activities that focus on “language drills or controlled practice leading towards communicative language use” (p. 26). Finally, in teaching a language, we are required to understand what impact communication has not only to the form the target language requires. So, researchers and teachers need to pay attention to a shift in language learning and teaching and to turn our attention and interest to more communicative-oriented lessons.

Hence, the research suggests that the success of language learning may rely on how much and how well this communicative-oriented approach in second or foreign language teaching is implemented. For this approach, the student needs to have direct access to members of the target language and culture, as well as the opportunity to experience them in context, beyond textbooks. In other words, students need to interact with the people of the target culture in an authentic setting where meaning is connected to language practice (Rivers, 1981).

Learning a language means more than memorizing vocabulary and understanding the rules of grammar. The real objective is to learn to communicate with speakers of the language. Breen and Candlin (1980) noted that, “learning to communicate involves acquiring knowledge of the conventions which govern communicative performance” (p. 91). Teachers can help their students to achieve communicative competence by adopting methods which increase the linguistic, social, and interaction knowledge and skills that they must have to interact in the second language.

One of the ways to provide an opportunity for the student to become communicatively competent is for the teacher to provide an authentic environment that encourages this outcome. To do this, the teacher can introduce technology tools, such as TV, Film, or the Internet, into student learning. These tools can provide a variety of contextual inputs that traditional textbooks cannot (Cummings, 1994), because students are exposed to a variety of unpredictable language situations, which are more characteristic of authentic language environments. This is in contrast to the teacher simply providing all of the language input for discussion. In other words, discussions based on this type of native language interaction will yield two-way interactions between students and teacher and among students. These

discussions can go in a countless number of directions since they are based upon student perceptions of a language event that everyone has viewed at the same time.

However, the success of employing higher technology in the classroom may depend on how the teacher adapts the material to meet student needs to provide meaningful input. As Warshauer (1996) states, although the hypermedia made a significant impact on language teaching which has been largely beneficial, the problems reside in the availability of quality programs, the amount of teacher training in the use of technology, and the degree of creativity needed to make teaching materials for the classroom.

With the implementation of technology into many areas of life, it is usually the younger or more adventurous teachers who will strive to integrate the opportunities that these new tools can offer in terms of language interaction. However, since students are being exposed to and stimulated by new learning environments, like the Internet, effort must be made to utilize the new generation of authentic learning interactions that these technologies offer. The technology has the potential to attract and keep the attention of younger learners making them feel that language opportunities are not just interactive but also relevant. Being sensitive to student perceptions in the area of technology will become a necessary characteristic of a learner-centered curriculum which provides opportunities for communicative competence.

In addition to employing technology in teaching to develop students' communicative ability, according to Savignon (1972), the success of the communicative-oriented lessons depends on:

the individual's willingness to express himself in the foreign language, on his resourcefulness in making use of the lexical and syntactical items which he has at his command, and on his knowledge of the paralinguistic and kinetic features of the language-intonation, facial expression, gestures, and so on-which contribute to communication. (p. 153)

From this point of view, Savignon (1983) demonstrates her approach of the feasibility of communicative competence as a pedagogical concept. She explains that learning a language is making meaning of the language. Accordingly, the role of the teacher can be how he/she provides opportunities for meaningful input to increase the student communicative ability in the target language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

As teachers of English as a second or foreign language, it is challenging to combine the principles of communicative competence while simultaneously letting students determine aspects of what is implemented in the classroom. The teacher's part is to make purposeful and meaningful communication contexts available to students in order to provide them with systematic opportunities for language competence. Brumfit (1980) notes, a methodology for communicative competence that takes into consideration the students' part in this process is "one that allows the learner to structure all the learning, without losing the advantages of the greater experience of language learning situations which good teachers bring to the classroom" (p. 9). Hence, the teacher needs to use methods to help his/her students achieve communicative competence while at the same time allowing them to structure their own language interaction. To increase a learner's chances of structuring their own learning in authentic language settings, Canale and Swain (1980) support the idea of providing opportunities for second language learners to have "meaningful communicative interaction with highly competent speakers of the [target] language" (p. 27). In other words, it is vital

that the second language learner have the opportunity to “respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic second language situations” (p. 27).

Based upon this understanding of the principles of communicative competence and the students’ role in creating truly communicative opportunities in the ESL classroom, Breen and Candlin (1980) note, communicative curricular are the foundation of providing learning which is “open and subject to ongoing developments in theory, research, and practical classroom experience” (p. 107). In addition, they argue that communicative curricular are needed to provide the opportunities for students to attain communicative competency:

Communicative curricular are essentially the means of capturing variability. Variability will exist in selected purposes, methods, and evaluation procedures, but variability must also be seen as inherent in human communication in the ways it is variously achieved by different learners and teachers. The classroom-its social-psychological reality, its procedures and activities-is potentially a communicative environment where the effort to pull together such variability is undertaken (p. 107).

Nunan (1988) also supports this idea that students can achieve communicative competency when a learner-centered curriculum, whose reality of “not what educational planners say ought to happen, but what teachers and learners actually do, “ is employed (p. 1). This curriculum stimulated by communicative language teaching results from a collaborative effort involving the “negotiation and consultation between teachers and learners” (p. 36). By doing this, the teacher can analyze what students specifically need and are interested in and implement this into curriculum planning. In consequence, Nunan (1998) perceives the development of communicative curriculum as being “largely a matter of effective teacher development” (p. 14). In other words, in order to develop communicative-oriented teaching successfully, teachers themselves need to understand how to innovate a curriculum to meet their own unique teaching context (Li, 1998). Rather than looking for the best method for the communicative curriculum, teachers need to find the “most appropriate approach, design of materials, or set of procedures in a particular case” (Rivers, 1987, p. 6). Two areas that Nunan distinguishes this type of curriculum development from traditional course development are in planning content and assessment and evaluation.

In regard to the second area that Nunan addresses, assessment and evaluation, it is argued that students should become involved with teachers in their own progress assessment, as well as participate in the evaluation of other elements of the course, such as “materials, activities and learning arrangements” (Nunan, 1988, p. 134). This participation, the author maintains, makes students more active in, as well as more critically self-aware of the learning process.

## **Methodology: Interviews**

I began the interviews with a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the interviews. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) assert that “interviewing is a project for producing meaning” (p. 14). Mishler (1991) also claims that interviews are a useful tool that produces “meaningful and promising findings” (p. 76). The narratives show how “individuals attempt to order, organize, and express meaning” (p. 106). I asked 6 in-service teachers currently utilizing CLT, hereafter called Teacher A through F, to tell me a little bit about their teaching experiences. These are descriptive questions (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979) meant

to open up dialogue between the interviewee and interviewer. Spradley (1979) calls these kinds of descriptive questions *grand tour questions*.

First, in order to identify Thai teachers' problems in the implementation process, I asked what particular problems they encounter in their classrooms when they employ Communicative Language Teaching. I also asked what possible solutions could be for the problems.

Second, after asking and analyzing answers to the general questions, I asked more specific questions. These were more structural questions by which I, as the researcher, could gain a deeper knowledge about the interviewees' main points (Spradley, 1979, p. 60). The follow-up questions and answers were about the syllabus, textbook, and classroom management. These questions are called *mini tour questions* (Spradley, 1979).

While collecting the data, in an attempt to eliminate any possible ambiguities or misunderstandings, I interviewed some participants for further clarification on certain points after analyzing their narratives.

## Findings and Discussion:

### Teachers' Perceptions towards the Use of English Textbook in Thai Classrooms

Through the interviews with the six teachers, I found that each teacher appeared to have difficulties in providing opportunities for students to communicate using their English textbooks and that they often feel the need to adjust the teaching materials to meet students' needs, level, and interests. Teacher E states:

“I think most teachers don't know what the aims and mission statement of their schools are and, therefore, don't know how to design their syllabus accordingly. If the aim of the school is to produce communicative-competent learners, many teachers don't know what CLT is, how to apply it, and how to measure their students' development.”

Hence, teachers should be a part of the textbook selection process in order to help students practice real world communication. They need also consider whether or not the textbook provides clear contexts that meet the school's aims and program goals.

Teacher F proposes a possible solution for choosing suitable textbooks in Thai CLT classrooms:

The best way to choose a textbook is to determine whether or not that book is going to help teachers meet the school aims and program goals. If our aim is CLT, we should try to determine if the activities in the book give the students opportunities for real world communicative practice. Does the book provide clear contexts? Does it have activities in which the students get to speak and share their writing with others?

In this way, teachers will be able to lead the classroom in a student-centered communicative way that reduces emphasis on grammar and accuracy and focuses more on communication and fluency.

### Teaching Problems

First, though many teachers believe that the implementation of CLT principles would improve Thai students' low proficiency in English, there is a lack of confident Thai teachers who can provide authentic environments utilizing the CLT approach. Teachers who teach English in Thailand are mostly nonnative speakers who often have, themselves,

low proficiency in spoken English. Thai teachers generally use Thai as the medium of instruction in their classrooms and are, therefore, not capable of providing meaningful input and interaction due to a lack of language confidence. For this reason, the Thai government needs more competent English language teachers in order to help students develop language competency.

Teacher A states:

“It seems to me that qualified and successful English teachers should have qualifications as follows: good teacher characteristics, confidence, and self-efficacy. Moreover, training teachers to effectively use CLT activities is also necessary for solving this problem. Highly trained and knowledgeable teachers are necessary in order to create a successful classroom environment.”

It is essential that teachers using CLT are able to provide language input in English for students to interact within the classroom. They should be able to create a variety of content and contexts to support learning in promoting communicative ability.

Second, teaching involves the ability to create meaningful activities which will motivate students to speak. Teachers need to provide activities in order to promote the students to be communicatively competent. Teacher B explains:

“Creating activities and tasks related to real communication, teachers should create activities that help students practice communicative competence that simulates everyday life as much as possible. Teachers will play the key role in developing their students’ abilities and providing their students routes to language learning. Successful language learning involves the use of effective learning and communication strategies. The role of the teacher in the language classroom is that of a facilitator who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language.”

Third, teachers need to provide authentic materials to encourage speaking in the classroom, and to be aware of what materials appeal to ESL/EFL students. Accordingly, teachers should provide more opportunities for students to speak by employing meaningful activities that encourage suitable communicative techniques. Teacher C stresses the importance of practicing language in real world situations:

“The teacher must design courses which are able to encourage the development of communicative oriented teaching materials so students will have opportunities to practice using authentic materials on topics of their interest. Using authentic teaching media, the students are able to see the real world and imagine the teaching aims clearly. Additionally, choosing suitable teaching materials will have a positive effect on student motivation.”

### **Classroom Management**

Characteristics of good language teachers are that they use a variety of classroom management skills which facilitate language learning. However, Thai teachers seem to have difficulties in managing large class sizes. Teacher E comments on one issue related to this point:

“A large class size makes it more difficult for teachers to employ CLT because it is harder to keep the students’ attention and nearly impossible to monitor students’ production. Teachers then revert to lecture/grammar/vocab lessons because they are easier to deliver.”

As a result, teachers are facing difficulty in preparing activities and materials to suit different student needs. Additionally, classroom management issues characteristic of large classes often lead to time spent off task, further shortening the already limited contact time. Teacher D comments on the difficulty employing suitable activities in CLT classes due to large class sizes:

“A common problem for students is caused by the fact that class sizes are often too large to use CLT. Having 12 students in CLT classes would be suitable for many activities. If student numbers cannot be lowered, it becomes necessary to have an assistant teacher in CLT classes. Small group interaction could potentially provide students with adequate opportunities to become communicatively competent.” Teacher C explains why small group work is important in combatting many issues associated with large classes for promoting communicative competency in CLT classes: “In my case, I cannot allow for students to practice their speaking skills in class and I cannot check students’ writing carefully because of the large number of students. Furthermore, students pay less attention in large classes. They make loud noises and spend a lot of time talking off topic with their classmates. As a result, students spend less time learning. In my opinion, small group work would make learning in large classes more efficient.”

Hence, large class sizes may be a factor that has been preventing the successful utilization in Thai classrooms.

### **National Entrance Examinations**

Thai teachers and students are under a heavy burden to get high scores on English examinations. These examinations tend to place more emphasis on knowing linguistic elements of the English language which do not always align with the communicative goals that CLT encourages students to attain. Teacher C describes his teaching environment:

One of the biggest hindrances to implementing CLT is the national entrance exam. Thai teachers do a lot of “teaching to the test” throughout Thailand. They still teach grammar/vocabulary lessons which are not a main focus in the CLT approach.

Despite this, students need to do well on English exams in order to enter university. To meet student and test needs, teachers have to strictly follow the schedule prescribed by the district authority. These requirements place a lot of strain on teachers hoping to provide students with language activities with communication oriented language objectives.

Teacher D suggests that the Thai government provide more financial assistance for Thai English education to be more successful by adopting suitable CLT evaluation standards. Likewise, teacher A insists:

“Although Thai students are taking exams that contain CLT oriented elements like listening and reading comprehension, the cost for

evaluation is not cheap. Hopefully, the Thai government will maintain a budget to continue this policy.”

### **Teacher Training**

Last, if we want teachers to learn how to create and implement CLT lessons, teacher training in CLT methodology is necessary and should be ongoing. Teacher training can be very effective when implemented with specific learner objectives and outcomes in mind. Specific guidelines on classroom teaching are needed so that teachers can implement new approaches in teaching English. Teachers often feel that they do not receive adequate training and are often left feeling unsupported.

Teacher B tells of the importance of teacher training for the implementation of the CLT approach in the Thai language learning environment:

“Teachers should receive training in implementing CLT activities and teaching methodology. The activities should be authentic and should resemble students’ circumstances and environment. Teachers should be trained to use a variety of teaching techniques in order to make their lessons interesting. With more teaching techniques at their disposal, teachers will be better equipped to choose teaching activities suitable for learners.”

Teacher E also supports the idea of employing organized ongoing teacher training, which could provide effective teaching practices in CLT classrooms?

“Teacher training is always a good thing. Teacher training can be very effective if organized with a very specific learner objective and outcome in mind. If we want teachers to learn how to create and implement CLT lessons, training in CLT methodology is necessary and should be ongoing. Teachers should also be given opportunities to create their own CLT activities with their peers and to share them with each other during the training.”

Teacher A insists that useful training needs to be implemented in order for CLT to be effectively utilized in the classroom:

“Teachers should also be trained on designing CLT activities for the four major skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Teachers should be able to assess the training and their assessments should be considered as ways to improve future training sessions. Finally, training should follow the teachers from the workshops and seminars into their individual classrooms.”

Teacher C strongly believes that ongoing teacher training programs can effectively assist qualified teachers in creating productive environments for student learning:

“Qualified teachers are able to create the best environments for learning. It would be best to give assistance by organizing training sessions, seminars, and conferences for teachers at all levels of ability and experience. In addition, teachers should be offered continuous training by providing seminars, workshops, and conferences every year.”

Teacher F agrees that specific professional training programs, including workshops and seminars, will help teachers broach new ways of teaching with confidence:

“Certainly, effective workshops and seminars are always helpful in giving teachers ideas for employing and reflecting upon new methods. Just like the students, teachers need support when trying out new things. When people are supported in their efforts to learn and apply new ideas, they are more apt to be successful and will gain much needed confidence. Workshops and development support can be provided by anyone who is knowledgeable and well-practiced”.

Finally, successful teachers need to develop themselves as language teachers. They can attend teacher training courses to enhance their teaching competencies in EFL situations. They can also join workshops that promote practical teaching skills and help to find possible problems and solutions they might face in the classroom.

## Conclusion

In order to provide opportunities for students to learn to communicate in English productively, Second/Foreign language teachers need to think about how we, as language teachers, can teach our second language learners efficiently. While the Thai government has attempted to bring emphasis to communicative ability in its education system, many teachers still struggle to lead their students communicative competence. This is a qualitative study which aims to gain a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of why the Thai education system and its teachers are falling short of many of its English language educational goals, namely to bring their students to communicative competence.

Through interviews with 6 in-service teachers currently utilizing CLT, this study attempts to gather insight into the challenges that many Thai teachers are facing in utilizing this approach to teaching English. The interviews with each of the teachers, one at a time, included a short introduction explaining the purpose of the study, general descriptive questioning and a period of specific questioning in order to delve more deeply into the teachers' experiences and struggles implementing CLT in their classrooms. Finally, after analyzing interviewees' narratives, I interviewed some participants for further clarification of their points.

The interviews yielded three important findings. First, students need exposure to language materials and input that are conducive to CLT and that fosters communicative competence. Class textbooks should be carefully chosen in accordance with the school's aims and curriculum goals. Namely, textbooks need to be analyzed for their capacity to provide real-world language contexts and activities that align with the goals of CLT. Also, teachers, as a model for language usage in the classroom, need to provide students with quality language input. Teachers should provide quality authentic materials and activities that simulate authentic language contexts for language usage. Specifically, teachers must provide effective modeling of communicative techniques in use and allot time for students to practice those techniques.

Second, the teacher should create opportunities for students to gain communicative competence by employing group work for communicative activities. Sitting students in small groups is an effective way to combat large class sizes. This seating arrangement has the potential to provide students with opportunities to communicatively interact with one other. Because of large class sizes, Asian students including those from Thailand and other English

language learning environments do not have many opportunities for suitable communication with their teachers and peers. By sitting students in small groups, students are given the opportunity to perform communicative activities to achieve a more effective and purposeful communication of meaning. If teachers use more meaningful activities utilizing small groups, students will be more deeply involved in the communicative activities thus providing students adequate opportunity to become communicatively competent.

Last, teacher educators need to provide teachers in development programs with opportunities to process how they get students to communicate in English. To do this, in order to avoid prescriptions about what and how to teach, teachers can explore their own teaching (self-observation) and the teaching of others (observation) in order to gain awareness of their own teaching (Gebhard, 1996). Teachers need to pay attention to their teaching, monitor it, and analyze it. In order to work on the development of our teaching, we, as language teachers, should not remain satisfied with our present situation. We need to grow and learn constantly to get more knowledge for our teaching. As Mayer (1990) notes, most change happens in a “more gradual and incremental” (p. 4) way, and it is a “permanent and a lifelong process” (p. 243). Ultimately, we should explore alternatives in our teaching rather than judge our teaching practices (Fanselow, 1992, p. 2). This ongoing development helps us to liberate ourselves “from the prescriptive confining voices of those who believe they know the best ways to teach” (Gebhard, 1998, p. 8). Accordingly, quality education can be provided by teachers who are aware of the significance of effective teaching and pursue more suitable ways of teaching for the enhancement of student learning.

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