



Challenges to Teacher Education in Teaching Preparation: Factors Affecting Teaching Practices and Beliefs about Communicative Language Teaching of English Language Student-Teachers in Southern Thailand.

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Abstract

This study explores the problems affecting the English Language (EL) student-teachers (STs) in implementing Communicative language Teaching (CLT) during teaching practicum; and its effects on their teaching beliefs about CLT. The purposive samples were the fifty-three EL STs from two southern Rajabhat Universities in Yala and Songkhla. An exploratory survey method utilized two self-rating questionnaires and two open-ended questions to explore data about teaching challenges-and- justification; and teaching beliefs. The results show that EL STs, whilst regarded in CLT, expressed tension with many challenges, mainly related to teachers' demotivation in CLT, learners' learning inability, CLT conceptual ambiguity and grammar-based examination. Despite showing keen interest in teaching with CLT, EL STs' positive beliefs in CLT was lower after the practicum. For success in innovative teaching, the need for teacher education in investigating teaching challenges through teaching beliefs development prior to the initial teaching practicum and at all courses of professional development is recommended.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Student-teacher, Teaching Beliefs, Communicative Language Teaching



Background

1.1 Challenges in teaching practicum of the student-teachers

To enter teaching practicum, Student-teachers (STs) who have been theoretically equipped through teacher education are expected to demonstrate their teaching professionally (Mak, 2011; Flores, 2020). This expectation primarily includes the ability to cope with any classroom challenges. STs with little experience of teaching are less adept in connecting their activities to the actual classroom (Borg, Lightfoot & Gholkar, 2020). McIntyre (2003) argued that new teachers emerged a gap between their conception of teaching and the classroom realities and expressed dissatisfaction with the far-reaching policy. The teaching innovations imposed from the top-down policy may be a challenge to STs because they are naive in validating their personalized practice in learning to teach (Mak, 2011). Accordingly, the teaching knowledge obtained from the teacher education courses will be ejected when the classroom condition is perceived as difficulties (Johnson & Golombek, 2020). As Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite (2001, p. 472) marks "the adoption of a new technique and new curriculum has to be accommodated within the teacher's own framework of teaching". The matter in teaching is that teachers are likely to 'not' adopt the teaching policy if they do not believe they can overcome teaching challenges.

1.2 Teaching beliefs and teaching challenges

According to the constructivist theory of learning, teachers' personal theories of 'learning to teach' are a central element of teacher development (Flores, 2020). Borg (2017) claims teachers' personal beliefs act as the filters of their instructional decision-making. The cognitive state is claimed to occur when the teacher perceives that new things are not what they had expected them to be. Richardson (2003) describes the nature of novice teachers' prior beliefs as 'highly idealistic, loosely formulated, deeply seated, and traditional' (p. 6). In many cases in English teaching, traditional earlier beliefs outweighed the formal knowledge they adopted from the teacher's college in influencing their practice (Brog, 2009). The inexperienced language teachers may bring personal beliefs to the classroom which are considered as blocking the pedagogical reform. Hence, the research into teachers' teaching beliefs in teaching is worthwhile.



1.3 Teachers' challenges due to English teaching reform in Thailand

Thailand's 2008 English language Curriculum imposed for Basic education underlines 'language for communication' as the main learning goal among the other four learning stand, i.e., language and culture, language and its relationship with other learning areas and language and its relationship with the community and the world (OBEC, 2008). Since then, EL school teachers nationwide have struggled with the paradigm shift from the traditional grammar-focused to communication-oriented learning using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT hereafter) (Noom-ura, 2013). Many teaching problems were primarily due to teacher professional development (Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). Studies found EL teachers have faced numerous problems in an attempt to employ innovative pedagogy (Kwon, 2017; Tichachart, 2020). Thailand's educational sectors have provided continual training workshops for English teaching, yet, the teachers' perceived difficulties in teaching has been extensively reported (e.g. Noom-Ura, 2013; Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020). The problem is complicated because teachers generally do not change the way they teach but continue to follow old patterns (Richards, 2017). EL teacher education in Thailand should be developed by mean of the insightful consideration of these possible aspects of challenges.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the difficulties in teaching CLT the EL STs perceive as the challenges and how their pedagogical beliefs will be changed by these challenges. Research questions are:

1. What are the difficulties/problem which the EL STs perceive as the challenges in implementing the innovative pedagogy of CLT during teaching practice?
2. To what extent, the teaching beliefs about CLT of the EL STs will be progressed after experiencing classroom teaching challenges?

Methods

The study employed an exploratory survey approach to explore data about the difficulties the EL STs perceived as their challenges and the teaching beliefs about the innovative method of CLT. The fifty-three samples are the STs in English Education program from two universities in the Thailand's southernmost provinces - Yala and



Songkhla. The samples were selected by purposive sampling as they shared common features; enrolling on the course of school-based practicum in Academic Year 2019; have passed the CLT course and declaring commitment to employ CLT.

3.1 Research instruments

The instrument used are two questionnaires:

1. Inventory of Communicative Language Teaching Challenges (In-CC) was adapted from Zekariya Ozsevik (2010)'s rating scale questionnaire that originally designed to evaluate EL student-teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing CLT in Turkey where the English is as the foreign language as similar to Thailand (Littlewood, 2014). Part one(P1) is the self-survey with four-scale rating about teaching challenges divided in four aspects relating to the teacher, learner, educational and educational administration and CLT principle. Part two(P2) collects STs' subjective comments to the open-ended question prompting their self-reflective thinking of their teaching challenges (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). This aims at their justification and underlying reasons for their instructional decision that will uncover their personalized teaching beliefs. The In-CC collected the STs' responses Follow-up questions were given via email to clarify unclear data to guarantee trustworthiness.

2. CLT - Cognitive Beliefs Inventory (CLT-CBI) developed originally by Karavas Doukas (1996)'s twenty- four statements questionnaires to examine teachers' teaching beliefs toward CLT in five aspects, i.e. grammar place, error correction, teacher role, learner role and use of CLT activity. One important adaption made at the beginning the statement was added 'I believe.' to prompt the participants' answers on 'what they understand and believe' about teaching method. To track the beliefs change, the student-teachers were requested to respond to this CLT- CBI survey twice; one before and another one after the practicum.

3.2 Data Analysis

The numeric rating scales data were analyzed with the use of statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentage, mean and standard deviation calculations were utilized to produce descriptive central tendency statistics to present an overall level of teachers' thinking of teaching challenges and belief about CLT. The percentage was used to qualify the number of participants corresponding to each challenge statements in In-CC survey. The ranking was used to determine the most and least challenge perceived



by the EL STs. Content analysis method was used to figure out the answers from the open-ended questions to yield the STs' written descriptive data about their justification in teaching and dealing with the reported challenges.

Findings

4.1 Profile data of STs participants

The selected samples are 44% of STs from Yala Rajabhat University(n=24) and 56% from Songkhla Rajabhat university(n=29). Significantly 30% of the STs participants who assessed themselves 'Poor' level of English language explaining they were low in grammar knowledge and speaking skills. Most STs (62%) 'rarely' used English outside the classroom. The STs who were the school students when the school syllabi were CLT-based, reported they mostly taught with the Grammar-translation (49%) and Audio-lingual method (35%)-the controlled version of CLT (Littlewood, 2014). Only 6% of the STs who learned with CLT misinterpreting the Audio-lingual drilling as CLT

4.2 EL Student-teachers perceived challenge in CLT practice

Table 1 Student-Teacher-Participants' Challenges in Implementing CLT (n=53)

Code		(n)/ (%)	Rank
C1	*CLT demands high time-spending in preparation	50/94	1
T1	* Teachers are not confident in English communication skills	47/89	2
T2	*Teachers are not able to make effective use of CLT	47/89	
S1	Learners lack basic knowledge of grammar.	47/89	
Ed1	Schools' syllabus emphasizes grammar and linguistics	45/86	3
T3	*Teachers inadequate training in CLT practice	42/81	4
T4	*Teachers lack knowledge and skill in CLT practice	40/78	5
T5	Teachers are required to apply the grammar syllabus	40/78	
Ed2	*There are not adequate supports from the school	40/78	
S2	Learners have low interaction in language practices.	40/78	
Ed3	*Schools imposed the grammar-based lesson and exam.	40/78	
Ed4	Classes are too large for practical use of CLT	40/78	
C2	*CLT assessment and evaluation are difficult.	40/78	



C3	*CLT approach is not suitable within Thai classroom	40/78	
S3	*Learners possess a passive learning style	39/76	6
C4	*CLT is a broad principle, not easy to translate into practice.	37/70	7
S4	Learners preferred grammar and vocabulary learning.	36/68	8
S5	*Learners have low motivation to participate in CLT activities.	36/68	
S6	*Learners own traditional attitudes of learning	34/66	9
C5	*CLT is not suitable for low speaking skill learners.	34/66	
Ed5	*There are not adequate materials suitable for CLT.	34/66	
T6	Teachers have misconceptions about CLT	22/50	10

Statements with * refers to the 0% of participants rated 'not a challenge at all'

In Table 1, data of different challenges was coded and ranked from the high-to-low percentage of the STs participants who responded to 'Major challenges' and 'Moderate challenges' to each CLT challenge. In the first rank, almost all of the participants (94%) rated 'Time-consuming in preparation' (C1) and 0% rated 'not at all,' indicating that it is somewhat interfering with their CLT practice. Other CLT aspects were agreed by most of them as problems, including difficulties in translating broad concept of CLT (C2) and assessing CLT (C4). Almost 80% even believed CLT is not suitable for Thai classroom. Among the top ranks, teachers-related problems (T1, T2, T3, T4) are voted by the vast majority of the STs (78-89%). Other concerns perceived by this vast majority relate to learners' English inabilities and learning demotivation (S1, S2, S3) and negative perception (S4, S5, S6). The minority are not intervened by the challenges involving educational administration (Ed), i.e., 'schools' grammar-focused syllabi'(Ed1), 'inadequate schools' support '(Ed2), and large-class size (Ed4). Apparently, grammar-related aspects of problems (S1, S4, Ed1, Ed3,) challenged most participants (78-86%). Three important findings are worth noting. First, no participant indicated 'Not a challenge at all' on the statements related to CLT itself (C1-C5). Second, they were in consensus viewing most of the challenge aspects as their CLT challenges, i.e., teachers-related (T1, T2, T4 and T5), learners-related (S2, S5, S6) and Educational Administration (Ed1, Ed2, Ed4, Ed5). Findings imply most aspects of these classroom teaching challenges possibly affect most STs in their CLT experiment during the initial teaching practice.



4.3 Student- teachers' pedagogical beliefs about CLT

Table 2 Pre and Post practicum STs' beliefs about CLT(n=53)

	Pre-Practicum (mean/s.d.)	Level of beliefs	Post-practicum (mean/s.d.)	Level of beliefs
Overall beliefs	4.01/0.42	Moderate Agree	3.49 /0.22	Slightly agree

The frequency means data shows that before the practicum, most participants hold a moderate level of beliefs with the CLT principle. The narrow- range of change of the mean scores (4.01 - 3.49) suggests STs neither held strong agreement nor strong disagreement with any CLT tenets along the course of the 16 weeks of utilizing CLT in the schools. At the end of the practicum, the STs' pedagogical beliefs remained being embraced with CLT concepts, yet, at a lower level. The SD lower than 1.00 indicates the teaching beliefs towards CLT were consistent across the cohort.

Discussion

The major points of discussion to be drawn as follows:

5.1 Teachers-related challenges

Because of their abilities and professions, the STs in this study perceived themselves as barriers to CLT adoption. Normally, language competence is accounted as the most crucial quality of being a qualified language teacher (Borg, Lightfoot & Gholkar, 2020). Data shows the Thai EL STs in this study were convinced in CLT, yet, expressed their English communication inability as a complication for them to teach. The language teachers' subject matter knowledge, for instance, their linguistic achievement and language command are the important determinants and can overshadow the mandatory teaching policy in shaping their instructional decision-making (Richards and Rogers, 2014). According to Karas & Faez (2020), teachers' confidence to teach may be undermined by a poor spoken command of language that will seemingly restrain their professional confidence as able teachers. Kwon's study displays the Thai EL teachers were not confident in handling communicative activities due to their communication



incompetency (2017). The fact that Thai EL teachers generally use Thai for classroom instruction (Forman, 2005) and rarely use English in reality (Noom - Ura, 2013) may be an issue. Thai EL teachers are, therefore, not capable of providing meaningful input and an interactive environment due to a lack of language proficiency (Richards, 2017). In conclusion, the EL STs should be equipped greatly with subject matter knowledge as well as pedagogical knowledge in order to sustain the ability and confidence' for innovative teaching.

5.2 Learners-related challenges

Learners-related factors play a crucial role in English language teaching either with CLT or non-CLT methods. The findings in this study correspond to previous studies which uncovered that the role of the learners' ability and learning background has a great impact on CLT (e.g., Noom-Ura, 2013; Kwon, 2017). The greatest focus of any classroom effort is primarily on the learners' performance and learner's background of subject-matter knowledge is the primary factor of learning achievement. The challenge is that when spotting learners' learning inability, teachers assumably believe the innovative learning goal is out-of-reach (Johnson & Golombek, 2020). Learners' grammar incompetence and preference for grammar other than CLT also challenging. Studies claim the learners did not see how learning with CLT will benefit their success in learning but grammar can help (e.g. Kwon, 2017; Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020). The EL STs in this study reflected the similar anti-CLT beliefs commenting that “pupils in and around southern border schools perceived English as 'alien' language which will never been used in reality” and “pupils preferred grammar learning for getting good grades”. To summarize, both the learners’ learning habits and attitudes relatively affected teachers' instructional decision about language teaching.

5.3 Challenges related to Educational Administration.

This study found the 'grammar' plays a dominant role in affecting CLT instruction in all aspects, i.e., teacher, learners, classroom and educational administration. The grammar-focused policy, in fact, is hidden implicitly as a schools' extra-curriculum. STs asserted in collective comments that the school assigned them to have the extra class grammar tutorial prior to the final exam. The grammar-focused school's syllabus and the exam were rigidly inherent in Thai context classrooms (Noom-Ura, 2013; Oeamoum &



Sriwichai, 2020) and other EFL context's (Ozseviz, 2010; Chali, 2020). The education system is mainly exam-oriented with both the school exam and university entrance exam interrupting CLT classroom integration (Huang, 2016; Hussain, 2018). Also, the learners' high contribution to grammar is aimed at passing the exam (Ghanbari & Ketabi, 2011). This appears to be the custom of English learning in almost all non-English speaking contexts, including Thailand, where English is not a daily language. The educational administration and school management are beyond the individual teachers' control. Their teaching challenges will not be resolved if the educational administrators do not bottom up the teachers' and learners' views.

5.4 CLT-related challenges

The high time-consuming nature of CLT preparation was ranked first in the list of CLT constraints. In fact, CLT aims at providing learners with meaningful interactive activities which, by its nature, demand high time operation for all pre-while-and-post activities (Richards, 2017). In this study, the STs included a variety of workloads in addition to their expected maximum internship working hours. Time - consuming pre-teaching and overloading hours amplifies STs' tension in teaching. Another significant point is that of the inconsistency between teachers' ideal teaching beliefs and classroom reality. Conceptual ambiguity has led teachers to become confused about CLT and its adoption (Borg, 2009). Experts agree the CLT is a broad principle and changeable by different classroom contexts (Littlewood, 2014; Harmer, 2007). Translating the ambiguous' concept of CLT into practice may be a greater challenge during the initial teaching experience. The STs who held positive beliefs in CLT felt stressed about conceptual ambiguity. The greater problem is that STs perceived they lacked practical training in CLT they should have gained from teaching college. EL teachers also felt the given training did not relate to the classroom reality (Noom-Ura, 2013). In sum, training with realistic input before the school practicum is needed.

5.5 Impact of perceived challenges to teaching beliefs

This study seeks the underlying notions for better understanding of the ST's beliefs about the innovative method of CLT which were changed to be more negative after encountering classroom challenges. Three significant points of discussion are drawn. First, the teachers are naïve in social validation with challenges and might believe more unfavorably in the innovative method. The STs' beliefs change, corresponding to the



argument of Breen et al. (2001), in the sense that the innovation method of a new curriculum must be accommodated within the STs' own framework of teaching beliefs, even if they declare a fairly strong commitment to utilizing it. As a consequence, teachers will not professionally nor confidently adopt any new method, if they do not believe they are able to overcome contextual challenges (Borg, Lightfoot and Gholkar, 2020). Another sensible notion is that the STs' resisted beliefs in CLT may arise from the traditional English learning they extensively stored from the school years. Most of the STs, while learning English in schools, were highly embraced with the traditional methods (i.e. Grammar – Translations method (GTM), Audio-Lingual method (ALM). In contrast to the CLT strategy, which requires meaningful and interactive learning input, GTM and ALM methods are, in the opposite, equipped with memorization and linguistic accuracy (Harmer, 2007). Richardson (2003) describes the nature of novice teachers' prior beliefs as 'highly idealistic, loosely formulated, deeply seated, and traditional' (p. 6). The STs' interaction with classroom difficulties was not constructive to their beliefs towards the new innovative method. It seems their deep-rooted traditional beliefs dominate the new established teaching beliefs. The teacher education reform, thus, should not solely focus on teaching knowledge in the absence of teachers' cognitive state of beliefs. Furthermore, teachers' teaching beliefs are known to be unstable and changeable depending on contextual factors (Johnson & Golombek, 2020; Borg, 2017). As novices, they are not effectively able to connect many different aspects of the actual classroom, nor are they able to associate them with the ideal theoretical beliefs (Mak, 2011). Thus, examining how the STs' perceive challenges in teaching and how their teaching beliefs change as the ongoing process is helpful. STs' sources of beliefs could be identified to gain effective strategies which the teacher education may use to adjust STs' established beliefs towards innovative approaches. In conclusion, the STs beliefs change to be more pessimistic in CLT in this study are apparently the effects of 1) social validation with the challenges 2) domination of traditional beliefs and 3) beliefs change when confronting difficulties.



Recommendations

The issues discussed above bases on the aim of the study to portray and justify the challenges and teaching beliefs change of the EL STs in experimenting with CLT teaching. The context of study emphasized when the STs who had novice experience with the actual classroom complex starting playing the role of practitioners. The study yielded significant recommendations for the three areas of education as follows:

6.1 For teacher preparation

First, a practice-based workshop with full equipped input from a near-genuine context of teaching should be provided. To avoid the idealized theoretical prescriptions about how to teach, teacher educators should reform the teacher preparation course to be more practice-based and more realistic training context. The study proposes the use of real-life scenarios and case-study inputs in their classroom alternative. Teacher educators can help strategically to improve individual self-teaching in referring to specific contexts. Since English classroom in Thailand CLT is offered within a foreign setting, impacting the whole culture of teaching (Holliday, 1996), insertion of cultural differences between social contexts of teaching may help. This study suggests the realization of the contextual challenges and initiation of prospective ideas in adapting CLT contextually. Situation analysis using situated inquiry can be used to enable the STs' systematic reflection on instructional reasoning (Borg, Lightfoot and Gholkar, 2020). This situated inquiry should include the introduction of the tools or techniques the STs can use to deal with the constraining factors that hinder the application of theory-driven principles. In this light, STs are given chances to apply and refine their understanding of CLT and how to relate their perception of the classroom teaching nature to their practices. Second, the 'prospective' problems should be fairly acknowledged by the STs to the extent which they can develop constructive awareness of teaching challenges. According to Debreli (2016), late exposure to practice context possibly leads to novice teachers' inability to develop pedagogical reasoning. Thus, STs should be prompted to confront the contextual constraints ahead of scheduling them the actual classroom practices. In this sense, the practice-based workshop which incorporates situated analysis should be provided in the teacher preparation as the meaningful input for the STs' self-awareness of 'learning to teach'.



6.2 For teacher supervision

This study recommends the teacher supervisors to insert the role of facilitator who assists the STs to be able to deal with the challenges through self- reflection amid their practicum. First, to encourage their self-reflection of how they perceive the contextual factors in teaching. The influential factors, for example, less able and passive learners and demotivation of learners' learning and teaching demotivation, time constraint, CLT ambiguity are the great examples of these meaningful inputs. "Identifying challenges and notions on teaching would allow the STs to develop an understanding of their thinking" (Almarza, 1996, p. 75). In this study, the STs addressed tensions between competing beliefs in their contextual challenges. Hence, teacher supervisors can offer practical suggestions as to how they can deal with these challenges by mean of self-reflection (Farrell, 2018). Second, in the practicum phase, teacher education should help STs become aware of their beliefs to help them sustain the innovative techniques and the mandatory methodologies. Beliefs about teaching and learning should be acknowledged early during initial teacher preparation to ascertain any positive change in the teacher's knowledge structure (Richards, 2006). Teacher education should prompt reflection on STs' beliefs by questioning existing beliefs about language teaching and learning and exploring beliefs that conflict with good practice and/or personal teaching experiences, an apprenticeship of observations. As learned from this study, the practical practice of 'beliefs' investigation is that teacher supervisors recognize the importance of STs' feedback with actions in support of the improvement of their ability to 'learn to teach'. Discussion of such challenging factors should be provided to help them to understand how and why to cope with them and how to balance them in their real practices (Farrell, 2018). At length, awareness of STs' beliefs and their possible influences in teaching may help the teacher supervisor to make sense of their performance and apprise them of the various options applicable to them. In sum, it is a real challenge for the teacher educator to continuously review the teacher education curriculum and delivery strategies as an ongoing process to ensure that the full potential of CLT can be tapped to improve the teaching and learning process.



6.3 For education administration

Thai policymakers need to investigate the relationship between the CLT-oriented syllabus and the non-CLT examination. The English language is perceived as a learning subject rather than a valuable tool for communication, particularly among upper-secondary learners in grades 10-12 (ages 16-18), who believe that grammar knowledge and passing the exam are required for a good grade and university admission (Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020). School students do not strongly consider communicative competence is needed for gaining such success. A recommendation proposed to the policymakers is that new assessment systems should free the EL teachers and learners from the exam-orientation effect. Otherwise, the EFL PSTs might not be able to see the value of CLT and lessen their demotivation in trying out the CLT method. Changing English teaching pedagogy could not be attained without a political and educational advocate (Mak, 2011; Chien, 2020), otherwise CLT will be just an idealist theory in the curriculum.

Conclusion

This study explores the teaching challenges and teaching beliefs in employing the mandatory approach – Communicative Language Teaching of the EL STs in southern Thailand during their initial experience of teaching. The study shows the interaction with contextual factors in the current classroom had an impact on teaching beliefs. The EL STs' teaching beliefs in the innovative method changed to be less positive, even their pedagogical beliefs indicated they endorsed it. The teachers' belief development and its connection to teachers' social validation during classroom practice is not a concern in the Thai context. This study hopes for collaborative discussion among stakeholders in Thai English education: student-teachers, teacher-educators, schools, administrators and policymakers. It is expected that the key stakeholders in teacher professional development are informed to pay greater attention to the teachers' teaching beliefs system as an instrumental component in training teachers towards innovative teaching.



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