

Teachers' Understanding of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach in Zambia

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Abstract: *The Zambia Primary School Syllabus recommends the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach as the methodology to use when teaching English Language as a second language to primary school learners. This implies that teachers should have adequate understanding of the methodology and how to implement it when teaching English language. The study aimed at establishing teachers' understanding of the Communicative Language Teaching approach as a teaching methodology. The study was qualitative and collected data using face to face interviews. The participants were 20 teachers from three districts in Central province of Zambia who were purposively sampled. The findings were that while teachers were using the Zambia Primary School syllabus, most of them failed to mention recommended methodology in the syllabus which they were supposed to be using to teach English language. Instead, they mentioned some activities used to teach English using CLT. The findings also showed that most teachers had limited understanding of CLT as they failed to describe and explain what it is. Arising from the findings, the study recommended that teacher training colleges should intensively train teachers on the teaching methodologies, and schools should engage in-service teachers in continuous Professional Development (CPD) meetings on pedagogy to help teachers enhance their pedagogical skills.*

Key words: communicative language teaching, approach, understanding

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of language has been affected by some changes in the teaching approaches and methods globally. This has been necessitated with a view to finding suitable approaches and methods for second language teaching and learning (Whong, 2011). The earliest was the Grammar Translation method (GTM) and thereafter the Direct Method, Audiolingual Method, Situational Language Teaching Method, Natural approach, Total physical Response, and Task Based Language teaching have been introduced (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Each of them

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had their own weaknesses and strengths and were based on different theories such as behaviourism, structuralism, and constructivism (Thamarana, 2015). To overcome the inadequacies of the earlier teaching approaches and methods, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach was introduced in the 1960s (Howatt, 1984).

The Communicative Language Teaching approach was introduced at a time when the language syllabus could not help learners acquire skills to help them communicate. Therefore, there was an increasing demand for effective English language teaching methods as English had become a global language both in trade and education (Bolkvadse, 2023). However, according to Laksanasut (2020), another reason which made a shift to Communicative language teaching was the need to teach workers English which had spread so that they could be proficient in English. This was because of the increasing interdependence among European countries which necessitated teaching adults some of the main languages on the continent as well as other parts of the world for easy communication in business and trade. It can be summarised that many learners needed English to acquire skills for occupational communication as well as academic circles (Richards, 2006). This saw the birth of the Communicative language teaching approach.

Communicative Language Teaching has been defined by many writers and many definitions are related. Communicative language teaching can be understood as ‘a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom’ (Richards, 2006, p2). According to Lindsay and Knight (2006), “Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasizes communication or interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language”. Communicative Language Teaching can also be said to be a systematic way of teaching where both the communicative view as well as structural view are considered side by side. Thamarana (2015), adds that ‘Communicative language teaching is one of the latest humanistic approaches to teaching approaches which gives emphasis to the language use and provides more opportunity to learners to practice the target language in spite of its limitation’. The use of the target language demands learners to develop communicative skills in all the four language skills, that is speaking, listening, reading, and writing to achieve the intended outcomes. The two main aspects of CLT are communication and language. Communication in the target language means that as pupils learn how to communicate in the classroom, they should be able to do so even outside the classroom.

Communicative language teaching has many principles which guide teachers. Richard (2006:13) summaries the principles of CLT as follows:

1. Make real communication the focus of language learning.
2. Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.
3. Be tolerant of learners’ errors as they indicate that the learner is building up his or her communicative competence.
4. Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.

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5. Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world.
6. Let students induce or discover grammar rules

The Communicative Language Teaching approach is a methodology that focuses on learner centered way of teaching as seen from the principles. It allows learners to take charge of their learning, and its focus is fostering communication in real life situations thereby developing Communicative competence. The argument is that using the target language in a meaningful way would help learners develop communicative competence (Thamarana, 2015).

CLT aims at communicative competence and therefore learners can use language in real life situations which helps to cultivate interest beyond the classroom (Thamarana, 2015). This means that language as learners learn the second language in class, the teacher should teach it using situations they are likely to face outside the classroom. Communicative Competence refers to having knowledge of various appropriate language patterns and using them in different linguistic contexts (Cooley and Roach, 1984). Communicative competence is measured by determining if, and to what degree, the goals of interaction are achieved Hymes (1972). For interaction to be achieved, language conventions should be followed. Hymes divided those conventions into competencies, and they cover a broad range of communication elements namely grammatical (or linguistic) competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence. However, it should be noted that the four competencies are dependent on each other to make communication competent. A learner needs to be taught that language has rules and for one to be linguistically correct, the rules of the language follow appropriate contexts and are applied situationally but at the same time discourse should be taken into consideration. Though not everyone may have mastered the rules of language, it is important to help the learners understand that they may use both verbal and nonverbal cues to express meaningful communication. According to Canale (1983) all the communicative competence elements should be integrated because they are complementary.

Despite being the most popular second and foreign language teaching method globally now, the use of Communicative language teaching has advantages as well as disadvantages. Zhao (2022) discussed the advantages of CLT and started that the obvious one was that learners can improve their fluency when communicating in the target language. This helps learners to be more confident as they express themselves in the target language. Dos Santos (2020) added another advantage of CLT approach by stating that it embraces student – centered way of teaching and clearly stipulates the teacher’s role to be a facilitator and encourage student communication through various activities which gives learners an opportunity to interact and use the target language freely leading to improvement in communication. The learner centered way of teaching provides students with insights on how to use English language comprehensively (Richards, 2006) as well as interaction among learners, and between learners and the teacher. Another advantage worth noting is that learners are motivated to learn another language because they can learn it through interaction with their friends. This means that language used by learners to interact and explore real life situations in the classroom is further practiced outside the classroom making it easier to relate to real contexts.

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The Communicative Language Teaching approach has some disadvantages as well. Mirbabayeva (2021) pointed out that CLT focuses more on meaning than form. This means that not much attention is given to the correction of pronunciation and grammatical rules. The approach also stresses fluency than accuracy thereby producing fluent but inaccurate learners of a target language.. Zhao (2022) added another disadvantage by stating that in CLT much time is spent on listening and speaking. This means that reading and writing are somehow ignored or less time is spent on them. He further added that CLT classroom activities require a small class size, but it becomes challenging to a teacher in a large class to engage all the learners in activities and help them individually.

The communicative Language Teaching approach has several recommended activities which are used in the classroom to help learners to be competent communicatively. Among the activities, Richards and Rodgers (1986:76), included ‘conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations, skits, improvisations, and debates. Other activities include problem solving, information gap, and project-based activities’. All the activities used in the CLT classroom require learners to communicate in the target language and have a varied use of language beyond the classroom. The teacher therefore needs to understand the activities and when to use them when teaching English using CLT. As put forth by Mwanza (2017), ‘Teachers should be professional in conduct while also being knowledgeable and competent in the subjects they choose to teach. This is so because teaching demands both professional and academic skills. Further, teachers should be researchers. This means that they should continuously build on the knowledge and skills they acquire in colleges and universities’. This means that teachers should be abreast with what is required of them in their teaching career and aim to enhance their pedagogy constantly for the benefit of the learners.

CLT is one of the known methods currently been recommended for teaching English in many countries around the world as a second or foreign language. In Zambia, the Ministry of Education (MOE), (2012) outlines that the teaching methodology for the Zambia English syllabus from grade 2 to 7 should be based on a Communicative approach. This means that teachers are supposed to use CLT to teach English to learners from grade 2 to 7. It means following all the CLT principles and utilising all the CLT activities to help learners learn the second language. Teaching using CLT requires primary school teachers who are knowledgeable about it and what it entails to teach using CLT.

Many studies have been conducted in line with Communicative Language Teaching approach. Alharbi and Aldaba (2018) conducted a study in Malaysia to explore the Centre for Strategic Education and Training (IIUM CRESCENT) English teachers’ understandings and practices of communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in their classrooms as well as identifying the situational constraints which they faced while using CLT in their teaching of English language. Mapako and Mareva (2012) conducted a study which focused on how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is conceptualized by secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe, using Masvingo District as a case study. Phiri (2020) conducted a study to assess final year student teachers’ preparedness to use the Communicative approach to teach English as a second language. Mwelwa and Mwanza (2020) conducted a study to analyse teachers’ classroom teaching strategies aimed at developing communicative competence in learners used

Published by the European Centre for Research Training and Development UK during English grammar lessons. This study therefore was meant to find out primary school teachers understanding of the Communicative Language Teaching approach.

Statement of the Problem

The Communicative Language Teaching Approach is the teaching methodology recommended to be used in teaching English Language in primary schools in Zambia (MOE, 2012). The primary school teachers having undergone primary teacher training are expected to be knowledgeable about CLT and its principles. Stated as a question, the research problem was; How do primary school teachers understand the Communicative Language Teaching Approach.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to establish primary school teachers' understanding of the Communicative Language Teaching approach.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study was qualitative study. Tracy (2013) described qualitative research as the 'collection, analysis, and interpretation of interview, participant observation, and document data to understand and describe meanings, relationships, and patterns'. The data was collected through face-to-face interviews using an interview guide as a data collection instrument. The participants were 20 grade six primary school teachers who were purposively sampled from schools in three districts in Central Province of Zambia namely Kapiri Mposhi, Serenje and Mkushi. Purposive sampling was used because the researcher wanted to collect data from people who were directly involved and were trained to teach primary school learners. Data was coded and then analysed thematically.

FINDINGS

The Communicative Language Teaching approach is the recommended methodology for the teaching of English in primary school. Teachers were therefore asked if they knew the methodology recommended to use when teaching English in the Zambia Primary English syllabus

Teachers' understanding of the English syllabus's recommended methodology for teaching English at primary school.

Teachers were asked to state the methodology currently recommended to use when teaching English. Most of the teachers said that the recommended methodology was groupwork, discussion, question and answer, and pair work. Inquiry, whole class and teacher exposition were also mentioned as the recommended methodologies by some teachers. However, one teacher said it was learner centered while another mentioned fluency, vocabulary, spelling and comprehension. The following were the responses from the interviews conducted.

It is groupwork and discussion that are supposed to be used (Teacher 1)

I think discussion, inquiry and groupwork (Teacher 3)

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I feel it is important to use teacher exposition so that learners can understand and add inquiry or discussion (Teacher 4)

Discussion, question and answer, individual are normally used (Teacher 5)

The use of question and answer, discussion, teacher exposition (Teacher 6)

Discussion, question, and answer, groupwork, pair work (Teacher 7)

Discussion, question and answer, demonstration (Teacher 8)

I explain then demonstrate, and use question and answer to find out if learners are following (Teacher 9)

Mainly it is teacher exposition, groupwork, question and answer, and whole class sometimes (Teacher 10)

It depends.... Discussion sometimes (Teacher 11)

Learner centered because learners are supposed to learner from each other (Teacher 14)

Fluency, vocabulary, spelling, comprehension (Teacher 15)

Teachers' understanding of Communicative Language Teaching Methodology

Teachers were asked to explain what they understood by Communicative Language Teaching. This was meant to establish if teachers understood what CLT is as it is the current recommended methodology for teaching English in schools. The responses were presented in themes as follows.

CLT is Communication between teachers and learners

Some teachers described CLT as communication in the classroom because its focus is enhancing communication. The following responses were from teachers who understood Communication Language Teaching as communication between the teacher and learners in the classroom.

It is reciprocal teach and get the response then communication has taken place (Teacher 4)

It is whereby you as a teacher you are using methods to communicate with learners as you teach them. It should involve teacher to pupil interaction (Teacher 5)

Teaching where you communicate with the learners, and you allow them to communicate with each other (Teacher 6)

Where you are communicating with children easily and they participate in the lesson (Teacher 8)

This is where you communicate with the learner (Teacher 10)

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Communicative Language Teaching enhances effective use of English.... enhances effective communication. Teaching whereby you are able to communicate with learners and learners are able to communicate among themselves (Teacher 12)

One communicates using the familiar language which everyone understands (Teacher 19)

It improves communication skills and encourages participation. It is the oral aspect of language grammar teaching. (Teacher 1)

Use of familiar Language to teach

Some teachers understood Communicative Language Teaching as teaching using a language which is understood by learners in a classroom. The following were the responses.

CLT is using language that learners can understand, and this facilitates communication between the teacher and the learners. Interaction, rapport, Feedback are features of Communicative Language Teaching (Teacher 2)

It is using a language which is closer to understanding of the learners whereby they are understanding what they are learning (Teacher 9)

Language which cannot create bias between the teacher and the learner (Teacher 14)

It is language where you are exchanging ideas and words with pupils (Teacher 17)

It the exchange of words in any language between the listener and the one speaking, in this case the teacher and the learners (Teacher 18)

It is the way of teaching using language learners are familiar with (Teacher 20)

Interaction between the teacher and pupils

Other teachers understood Communicative language Teaching as classroom interaction between the teachers and the pupils. The following were the responses.

It is when you are interacting with learners during teaching and learning (Teacher 3)

It is the interactive way of learning; learner understands you and you understand the learner.... meaning there is communication (Teacher 13)

It is one way of relating with learners (Teacher 15)

It is a comfortable way of teaching comfortable because you can understand, and the learners can understand (Teacher 16)

Learner centered

It is learner centered, learners get the concept (Teacher 7)

Lack of knowledge of CLT

However, one teacher stated that she did not have any idea about what Communicative Language Teaching is. Below was the response given.

Hmmm..... no idea (Teacher 11)

The findings on teachers' understanding of the Communicative Language Teaching methodology showed that some of the teachers understood Communicative Language Teaching as communication between the teacher and the learners in the classroom while others understood Communicative Language Teaching as teaching using language understood by learners in the classroom. However, few described it as classroom interaction between the teacher and the learners during the teaching and learning process. One teacher did not know what it meant.

DISCUSSION

The Zambia Primary English syllabus recommends the Communicative Language Teaching approach as the teaching methodology teachers are supposed to use when teaching all the English language components which include listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar/structure. To find out if teachers knew and understood CLT, they were first asked to mention the recommended methodology in the syllabus to find out if they were using CLT and then they were asked to explain what they understood by the Communicative Language Teaching approach.

Teachers' knowledge of the recommended methodology for ESL Teaching

The study established that teachers presented groupwork (teacher 1,3,7,10), discussion (teacher 1,3,4,5,6,7,11), question and answer (teacher 5,6,8,9,10), inquiry (teacher 3 and 4), whole class (teacher 10), teacher exposition (teacher 4,6,10), demonstration (teacher 8 and 9), learner centered (teacher 14) and fluency, vocabulary, spellings and comprehension as the recommended methodologies in the Zambia Primary English Syllabus. The findings showed that the teachers had less knowledge about the methodology recommended in the syllabus to teach English though the syllabus clearly stated it. The Zambia English Primary Syllabus recommends the Communicative approach as the teaching methodology currently in use to teach English and then role play, drama, problem solving information transfer, pair or group discussion, field trips and debate as techniques which the teacher would engage learners into as much as possible to enable them to interact and communicate among themselves and with the teacher in the teaching and learning process (MOE, 2012). In so doing learners are expected to acquire the second language which in this case is English. Teachers mentioned the techniques used when teaching English instead of the teaching methodology which is CLT. This showed that some of the teachers were teaching using some of the techniques under CLT even though they could not state the recommended methodology while others were mentioning the skills which were supposed to be enhanced such as fluency, vocabulary, spelling and comprehension after using the techniques recommended when teaching using CLT. This showed that although teachers were able to use some recommended techniques in the syllabus, they did not fully understand how they were supposed to teach English using CLT and they couldn't differentiate

between a methodology and technique. This could be attributed to their failure to fully interpret the Zambia Primary English syllabus despite having been exposed to it, and teaching at primary schools for some time. Further analysis revealed that some teachers were not abreast of the syllabus recommendations. Teachers need to interact with all the materials related to their profession such as the curriculum, syllabus, and textbooks to gain the necessary knowledge and skills required for them to effectively implement teaching and learning in the classroom using the appropriate methodology and strategies (Stigler and Miller, 2018). This is so because the teacher needs to plan the lessons according to the recommended methodology and interact with the content within the syllabus so that it is delivered within the specified context (Tsui, 2003).

Teachers' understanding of Communicative Language Teaching

The study also established through interviews that teachers had limited understanding of CLT. Teachers described CLT as communication, use of familiar language, interaction between the teacher and the learners and learner centered way of teaching. The recorded responses from the 20 teachers who were interviewed revealed that eight teachers described CLT as communication between teachers and learners (Teachers 1,4,5,6,8,10,12,19). Although CLT aims to improve the communicative competence of the learners through recognising the link between language and communication, it cannot be described merely as communication because a lot of aspects are involved for communication to take place. It appears that the misunderstanding that the Communicative Language Teaching method is about communication is widely held by teachers in many contexts. For example, Abrejo et al (2019) also found that the respondents in his study viewed CLT as being all about communication among students, but this does not fully describe what it is.

Some teachers described CLT as the use of familiar language to teach (teachers 2,9,14,17,18 and 20). The teachers explained that the use of a language known by the learners facilitates communication leading to learning because the learners can easily understand what the teacher is teaching. But Communicative Language Teaching advocates for the judicious use of the local language to help learners learn the second language effectively. The use of learners' familiar language is one of the features of CLT and can be used to facilitate learning. This is because language diversity in the classroom gives room for the teacher to help learners connect the unfamiliar language to the familiar language and CLT requires teachers to use necessary strategies to manage diversity in the classroom and facilitate second language learning (Engelbrecht, 2016). Thus, explaining the communicative language teaching as being the use of local languages is not accurate description of the method but merely a feature of the CLT.

Four teachers described CLT as an interaction between the teacher and the learners (3,13,15,16). One of the characteristics of CLT advocates for interaction between the teacher and the learners as well as among the learners. The description of CLT as interaction between the teacher and the pupils did not fully explain what CLT was but rather mentioned one of its characteristics showing that teachers had some ideas in connection to CLT. Another response that was given was by Teacher 7 that CLT was a learner centered way of teaching language which was true as an important feature of CLT but not as an explanation of what CLT was. Alharbi and Aldaba (2018) conducted a study in Malaysia to explore the Centre for Strategic

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Education and Training (IIUM CRESCENT) English teachers' understandings and practices of communicative language teaching in their teaching of English language found that teachers had satisfactory understanding of CLT. Similarly, Zulu (2019) found out that secondary school teachers had low to moderate understanding of CLT after she conducted a study in Mufulira to find out teachers understanding of CLT.

This shows that even though teachers were using the syllabus with CLT as the stipulated teaching methodology, they couldn't define, explain or describe what CLT is although their responses showed that they knew some of the activities related to teaching using CLT meaning they lacked in-depth understanding of it. None of them could give a comprehensive explanation of CLT. Many of them gave bits of what CLT was. And it showed that they had been using the syllabus and teaching without understanding what CLT is. But if teachers did not understand CLT comprehensively, it would be challenging for them to apply it appropriately and comprehensively in the teaching process (Richards, 2005). Consistent with the findings, Pratt (2018) who conducted an online survey on Teaching Assistants (TAs) who taught Spanish using CLT also reported that even though the graduate assistants under study had positive attitude towards the use of CLT, they were not knowledgeable about all the principles of CLT. Equally, Chishipula (2016) who conducted the study in public secondary schools in Chongwe district reported that teachers had failed to describe CLT, and they had a lot of misconceptions such as CLT should not be used to teach grammar, tolerance of errors when teaching, and that the focus was on listening and speaking only. Some teachers revealed that they were not trained in CLT methodology and therefore had no idea about it though the syllabus recommended its use. Teachers need to be abreast with any development in their career for effective delivery in the teaching and learning process. It can therefore be concluded that most teachers did not know the methodology they were supposed to use and couldn't even describe what it is. However, the syllabus clearly spells out the methodology teachers were supposed to use when teaching of the components of English to grade six learners.

The findings show that teachers had limited understanding of CLT as a methodology they were supposed to use to teach English grammar. Since CLT advocates for linguistic as well as communicative competence among learners, it can be inferred that the failure by teachers to describe and explain CLT affects teaching and learning in their classes as well which leads to poor language and literacy levels among learners in Zambia. The teacher should be able to understand what works in the classroom when teaching English using the skills attained during training. But some teachers could have limited knowledge about pedagogy because they may have received inadequate training. According to Richards (2006), teachers who do not have a comprehensive understanding about Communicative Language Teaching can find it difficult to apply it appropriately in the teaching process.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the study aimed to establish primary school; teachers' understanding of CLT. Teachers were first asked if they knew the methodology recommended in the syllabus to use when teaching English. It can be stated that teachers couldn't mention the recommended English grammar teaching methodology in the syllabus as well as explain what CLT was but rather mentioned some characteristics of CLT which weren't enough to reveal their

understanding. This showed that teachers had limited understanding of the Communicative Language Teaching approach. Teacher education at all levels should strive to educate teachers on pedagogy as much as possible as it is an important component besides content because for them to deliver content, they need to know how to do it. To overcome teachers' pedagogical inadequacy, human resources within the schools should be used through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) workshops to help teachers be abreast with the recommended pedagogy and to improve educational quality. However, the effectiveness of CPDs depends on the leadership of an institution. Some teachers may not be available for CPD meetings and may continue using outdated methodologies thereby creating gaps in the knowledge and skills of teaching (Phiri, 2022).

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