

Title of submission: Exploring English Teachers' Beliefs and Practical Knowledge about Communicative Language Teaching in EFL Contexts

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Abstract:

Recently the field of ESL/EFL has begun to recognize the importance of exploring the cognitive dimensions of how language teachers' thoughts, judgments, and decisions influence the nature of language instruction (Freeman, 1989; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Johnson, 1992). This study, drawing on the ideas associated with teacher beliefs, aims to suggest that we should also explore EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers' instructional practices, and provides insight to examine how language teachers make instructional decisions, choose instructional materials, and select certain instructional practices in applying communicative language teaching (CLT). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three EFL teachers in Asian countries. Results indicate that teachers' beliefs from their own language learning experience, their teaching experience, and their training inform their instructional practice in CLT. Their practical knowledge is the knowledge that they generate as a result of their experiences as teachers in their own teaching contexts.

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Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) starts from a theory of language as communication. Richards and Rodgers (1986) indicate that "the goal of teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as communicative competence" (p. 69). Since then, there has been a growing interest in communicative language teaching both in second and in foreign language contexts (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Savignon, 1991).

Despite the widespread adoption of CLT in ESL countries, research indicates that the adoption of CLT in EFL countries has generally been difficult (see Li's review in EFL contexts, 1998). Though it is difficult, still a number of countries are trying to promote CLT as a language teaching approach (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). Some difficulties identified in empirical studies are teachers' beliefs, CLT itself not having clear guidelines, non-explicit grammar instruction and so on.

During the last two decades research on teaching has increasingly focused on the cognition that underlies teachers' classroom practice, rather than their behaviors (Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard, 1999; Calderhead, 1996; Carter, 1990). Recently the field of ESL/EFL has begun to recognize the importance of exploring the cognitive dimensions of how language teachers' thoughts, judgments, and decisions influence the nature of language instruction (Freeman, 1989; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Johnson, 1992). This study, drawing on the ideas associated with teacher beliefs, aims to suggest that we should also explore EFL teachers' instructional practices and provides insight to examine how language teachers make instructional decisions, choose instructional materials, and select certain instructional practices in applying CLT.

Literature Review

The impact of teachers' beliefs on the practice in language teaching

Richards and Lockhart (1996) state that "teachers' belief systems are founded on the goals, values, and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it" (p. 30). These beliefs and values serve as the background to much of the teachers' decision making and action, and hence constitute what has been termed the "culture of teaching." Richards summarizes that teachers' belief systems are derived

from a number of different sources (Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler, 1988). They are (a) their own experience as language learners, (b) their experience of what works best, (c) established practice, (d) personality factors, (e) educational based or research-based principles, and (f) principles derived from an approach or method (p. 30-31). Borg's (1998) one-teacher study reports that the teacher's pedagogical system was shaped by educational and professional experiences in his life. The teacher in this study was profoundly influenced by his initial training. The teacher's experience introduced him to communicative methodology and fostered his beliefs in student-centeredness, which had an immediate and lasting impact on his practice in teaching.

Practical knowledge

Elbaz (1983) conceptualized the kind of knowledge teachers hold and use as practical knowledge. She identified the content of practical knowledge as “knowledge of self, the milieu of teaching, subject matter, curriculum development, and instruction” (p. 45). She also identified the ways teachers hold and use their knowledge as situational, theoretical, personal, social, and experiential, and she proposed three interrelated levels of structure within that knowledge—rules of practice, practical principles, and images. Research in language classrooms shows that teachers' feelings, values, needs and beliefs, combined with experience and theoretical knowledge, usually guide their language instructional practice. Teacher perceptions regarding how languages are learned also play a crucial role in that they determine a teacher's willingness to experiment with new approaches (Li, 1998). Penning and Richards (1997) study five English teachers in Hong Kong, who failed to implement CLT principles and practices in their classrooms. They suggest that one reason for this failure was the teachers' preexisting schema for teaching based on their

learning experiences as students in the Hong Kong school system. Ellis (1998) in his study on *“Teaching and Research”* states that practical knowledge is implicit and intuitive. Individuals generally are not aware of what they particularly know. The great advantage of practical knowledge is that it is proceduralized and thus can be drawn on rapidly and efficiently to handle particular cases. He continues to state that, “practicing professionals are primarily concerned with action involving particular cases, and for this reason they draw extensively on practical knowledge in their work” (p. 40). Teachers rely to a large extent on their practical knowledge (Calderhead, 1996). Fenstermacher (1994) described practical knowledge as the knowledge *of* teachers, which is different from formal knowledge, which he described as knowledge *for* teachers. Practical knowledge, Fenstermacher argued, is the knowledge that teachers generate as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on these experiences. After reviewing a number of studies on teachers’ practical knowledge, Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard (1999) concluded that practical knowledge has the following characteristics:

- (a) It is personal: Each teacher’s practical knowledge is to some extent unique.
- (b) It is contextual: defined in and adapted to the classroom situation.
- (c) It is based on (reflection on) experience, indicating that it originates in, and develops through, experiences in teaching.
- (d) It is mainly tacit: Teachers are often by definition not able to articulate their knowledge.
- (e) It guides teachers’ practice.
- (f) It is content related: connected with the subject that is taught.
- (g) Teaching is seen as a professional activity (p. 60).

By acknowledging that teachers are professionals, one assumes that there is a body of knowledge that teachers share (Harris and Eggen, 1993).

Characteristics of CLT

Richards and Rodgers (1986) synthesize all characteristics of CLT and state that the characteristics common to all versions of CLT is a theory of language teaching that “starts from a communicative model of language and language use, and that seeks to translate this into a design for an instructional system, for materials, for teacher, and learner roles and behaviors, and for classroom activities and techniques” (p. 69). The most common characteristics of CLT are as follows: First, in CLT, meaning is the most important function for communication. Second, contextualization is the basic premise of CLT. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), the most obvious characteristic of CLT is that “almost everything is done with a communicative intent” (p.132). Students use language a great deal through communicative activities (e.g., games, role playing, and problem-solving tasks). The problems faced by the learners in their daily lives are the source of content for a problem-solving program (Crawford-Lange, 1987). Another characteristic of CLT is the introduction of authentic materials (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Long & Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1991). In CLT, it is considered “desirable to give learners the opportunity to respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic situations so that they develop strategies for understanding language as actually used by native speakers” (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p. 132). Also, activities in the communicative approach are often carried out by students in small groups as Larsen-Freeman (1986, p.132) states. Students are expected to interact with one another, either through group work or in their writings. CLT favors interaction among small numbers of students in order to maximize the time each student has to learn through meaning negotiation. Thus, based on the above characteristics, teachers are to select learning activities according to how well they engage the students in meaningful and authentic language use rather than in the

merely mechanical practice of language patterns. Last, a “learner-centered and experience-based view of second language teaching” is also a crucial criterion (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.69). According to CLT theory, individual learners possess unique interests, styles, needs, and goals that should be reflected in the design of instructional methods (Savignon, 1991). Therefore, teachers are to develop materials based on the needs of a particular class. Students are made to feel secure, unthreatened, and non-defensive in a CLT classroom, so teachers using CLT should avoid adopting a teacher-centered, authoritarian posture (Taylor, 1983).

Empirical studies on teachers’ beliefs and practice of CLT

Karavas-Doukas (1996) did an attitude survey on fourteen Greek teachers of English to assess teachers’ beliefs about CLT. She found that the survey results leaned toward agreement with CLT principles, but when she observed the classroom teaching environments, “the classroom practices deviated considerably from the principles of communicative approaches.” (p. 193). Teachers tended to follow an eclectic approach, exhibiting features of both traditional and communicative approach in their classroom practices. Most lessons were teacher-fronted and exhibited an explicit focus on form. Li’s (1998) study, surveying eighteen South Korean secondary EFL teachers in 1995 and interviewing ten teachers, shows that the difficulties of applying CLT from those teachers fall into four categories: (1) Difficulties from the teachers are deficiency in English, deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence, lack of training in CLT, few opportunities for retraining in CLT, misconceptions about CLT, and little time for developing materials for communicative classes; (2) Difficulties caused by the students are low English proficiency, lack of motivation for developing communicative competence, and

resistance to class participation; (3) Difficulties came from the educational system are large classes, grammar-based examinations, insufficient funding, and lack of support; and (4) Difficulties for the teachers coming from CLT itself are inadequate account of EFL teaching, and lack of effective assessment instruments.

The following literature from three dissertations also indicates that the discrepancies EFL teachers have between their beliefs and their instructions in applying CLT. Li's (1997) dissertation, a qualitative study of six teachers, explores English teachers' understanding of English teaching, particularly the difficulties they had in using CLT in the Chinese context. The findings indicate that those teachers found serious problems in TEFL in China. They had many difficulties in implementing CLT in their classrooms. Although interested in change and eager to identify with CLT, those teachers were not optimistic about overcoming the difficulties and thus felt that there would be only limited use of CLT in TEFL in China. Difficulties that those English teachers encountered in using CLT have their sources in that CLT, as a methodology developed in the West, is laden with Western cultural values, which are very different from dominant Chinese cultural values. Therefore, Li suggests that rather than adopting CLT completely, Chinese teachers might want to incorporate some communicative components into their traditional teaching methods. Choi (1999) investigates the communicative language teaching of English as a foreign language from teachers' perspectives in Korea middle school classrooms. The purpose of the descriptive survey research is to explore Korean teachers' beliefs about the main objectives of English teaching as well as teachers' practices of CLT in classroom instruction. The result shows that Korean EFL teachers have positive beliefs about the concepts of CLT. It also reports that there are some discrepancies between teachers' beliefs about CLT and their practices of CLT. The

concepts of CLT that teachers support are (1) developing communicative classroom environments that blend the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, (2) providing appropriate, meaningful and comprehensive input to learners, (3) using motivational activities such as games and songs, (4) using audio-visual materials in language classroom, (5) using learner-centered activities, and (6) teaching grammar in a communicative way. However, the teachers report that their teaching practices in classroom instructions are still largely teacher-centered, teacher-dominated and drill-driven rather than learner-centered. Wang (2000) investigates English teachers at tertiary level in China to know to what extent English teachers have employed the key innovative practices associated with CLT. The findings indicate that those teachers have become more communicative-oriented. However, the results also indicate that traditional classroom features, such as teaching focused on the textbook or explaining new words in vocabulary lists, are still very common. The findings also show that it might not be the training respondents received but the type of students they taught that determined the extent to which they applied innovative practices in their teaching.

The above studies reveal a lot of constraints of applying CLT in an EFL context. Problems come from teachers' lack of confidence of applying CLL, inappropriateness of CLT in EFL contexts, large size of class, student factors, and teachers' fear of innovations. As Li suggests that teachers might want to incorporate a communicative component into their traditional teaching methods, changes must be made in teachers' understanding of language learning, teaching, and curricula in teacher education programs. A framework needs to be worked out to facilitate the process of introducing teaching methods into different contexts.

Research perspective

Previous empirical studies investigating teachers' beliefs or CLT practice might not have a sound design; therefore, teachers might perceive the discrepancy between CLT practice and their beliefs. This study aims to continue uncovering, examining, and articulating the multiple layers of understanding beliefs, knowledge, and practice from teachers. Few studies have been conducted to discuss more about experienced, competent teachers' practices in applying CLT, thus this present study attempts to explore experienced English teachers' knowledge about CLT with their practice in EFL contexts.

The research questions in this study are "How do EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers practice CLT in their contexts?" and "Do teachers' beliefs influence their practical knowledge?" The questions attempt to uncover (a) How do English teachers in EFL contexts implement CLT ideas in their classrooms? (b) What are the typical CLT ideas in their classrooms? (c) What difficulties do they encounter? (d) Will these teachers apply CLT in their future teaching? (e) Where are teachers' beliefs from? And (f) Do teachers' beliefs inform their teaching?

Methodology

This study was carried out by interviewing three experienced English teachers from two Asian countries, who are in a mid-west university for their doctoral or master's degrees. These participants voluntarily joined this study in April 2002. They are currently pursuing their professional development as English teachers. All the participants are equipped with teaching experience and with course work related to ESL/EFL teaching methods, which means they are also aware of the knowledge of CLT. The demography of the three participants with pseudonyms is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants in this study

| Pseudonym | Years of Teaching | Course of teaching | Degree / Current Status |
|-----------|-------------------|--|---|
| Jay | 13 | Reading in a university | MA in ESL (in the USA) Doctoral student |
| Lisa | 2 | General English in an institute of technology, and a business school | MA in TESOL(in the USA) Doctoral student |
| Tom | 2 | Reading, speaking, listening, grammar in an institute; Conversation in a senior high school | BA in Applied English (in his home country) Master's student |

Semi-structured interviews in English were conducted for 1-1.5 hours with each participant. The interview questions were e-mailed to the participants before interviews. Interview questions were designed to reveal the participants' educational background, teaching courses and schools, their students' level of English, the characteristics of CLT that they applied in their teaching, any difficulties they encountered in applying CLT, and the applicability of CLT in their future teaching.

The interview data were then transcribed for data analysis. Three cases of description about each participant will be displayed since the participants are from different countries and teach different courses to various levels of students. The three cases represent three different scenarios. These cases provide (1) an introduction of each participant, (2) a sketch of class from each participant's previous teaching, (3) the characteristics of CLT that they applied, (4) the difficulties they had encountered in applying CLT, (5) their perspectives of CLT application in their future teaching, and (6) where their teachers' beliefs are from. These transcriptions and the result of the data analysis were then e-mailed to the participants for member check.

Results

Case 1: Jay

Jay has thirteen years of teaching experience in his country. He got his BA in Secondary Education. After graduation, he taught “Fundamental English”—basic English reading skills and grammar for the most of the time— in English Department for two years. Then he came to the USA for his master degree in ESL Education from 1988-1990. During his MA practicum, he had to teach English as a second language in his school’s language institute. At that time, he incorporated CLT in his teaching in an ESL context. The characteristics were authentic material (He had to use *Time* as the required text at that time.), group/pair work, debates, and current issues at that time. One example that he mentioned and remembered was environmental issues.

The courses he took related to methodology in teaching are “Introduction to ESL and Practicum,” “Topics in Language Education” and “Advanced Studying in Foreign Language Teaching.” After he got his master degree, Joe went back to his country and taught English for academic purposes in a graduate school. One of the courses he taught was Reading Skills Development; the students’ level of English was intermediate.

An example of his class and the characteristics of CLT that he applied are as the follows:

He provided me with a course about reading skill development for students in a non-English department. He mentioned that he had to prepare authentic materials, such as journal articles, magazine excerpts, and articles from students’ fields. He said, “We selected authentic materials—journals, magazines, and textbooks from their

respective fields. We had to post questions or rearrange reading excerpts that we got from those journals and taught them.”

He taught grammar explicitly because the students would get lost while reading long sentences. He used “Bottom Up Approach” to teach reading. Because his students’ level of English was low, he had to explicitly explain the grammar rules to facilitate students’ reading development. Since his students would translate sentences into their native language, he would then teach them to translate correctly to help them develop their reading skills. He said,

We focus on elemental language first because we believe that for weak students [in English proficiency] one of the most serious problems they face in the reading test is that when they come across long sentences, they get lost. . . . We believe that we have to explicitly teach our students elements of sentences and by saying “explicitly,” I mean first of all, every word in sentences must be related to one another in order to form a meaning, the whole meaning— syntactically and semantically.

Jay did not mention a lot of salient features of CLT in his teaching. He tried to put his emphasis on students’ needs in their setting. In an EFL context, what is important for students is to pursue English as an academic purpose and to meet the exam requirement. He has his own interpretation of CLT, which is “when teachers around the world talked about CLT, they talked about the weak version of CLT, that is, we have got to provide students pair work, group work, the opportunity to discuss or interact with each other.” That was the weak version of CLT. It is not negative as he stated. In his context, he interpreted CLT as the following: “what we have been doing might be called CLT only if you agree with me that the strong

version of CLT is to teach students to see the working systems of a language.” He said,

By weak, it is not negative. It’s just the observational activities, but the strong version is that you have to teach students to appreciate the act that language has a system and you have to understand the system of the language, [which is] authentic and relevant to their fields.

Difficulties he had in applying CLT

Jay has no difficulties in applying CLT by himself per se and his language proficiency is near a native speaker of English. He had applied most common CLT characteristics in an ESL context in his earlier years. However, in his teaching context the students’ weak English and learners’ needs for learning good English are the main reason that hindered him from applying common characteristics of CLT. He emphasized the importance of grammar. He viewed CLT as set up for ESL contexts. Interesting this view echoes Li’s study (1997) as Li stated that CLT “as a methodology developed in the West was laden with Western cultural values, which are very different from dominant Chinese cultural values.” At this point, he did not just follow the “weak version” of CLT as he mentioned above, but he has his own teaching philosophy as he will express in his teachers’ beliefs.

When they [students] read English text, for most of the (his country’s) students, they translate into (their native language) automatically so why don’t we just teach them to translate correctly. Instead of stopping them from translating, at least we make sure they translate and they know how to translate correctly.

In the future, will he apply CLT in his teaching context

In the future, he will teach the same course and other courses. He offered me with ideas that “General CLT from Swain and Bachman is: It is grounded in ESL settings; therefore it may be appropriate to apply the whole thing. Teachers have to be well informed of the general CLT model first. They have to think about their own contingency in their own setting: How to select what is best for them.” He stated,

Because my idea is that CLT is or should be perceived as an option that brings language close to the reality outside the classroom. Teachers should not perceive CLT as a kill-all. I still believe grammar is important. But when we have to teach grammar, I am not saying that we have to teach using the grammar-translation method only, right? Grammar has to be taught in a way that would help students understand or realize that language is a system of communication. To be able to communicate effectively, students must know all the basic elements that will help them to use the language effectively and one of the important elements is grammar.

He mentioned “grammar is important” more than three times. It is clear that he believes the reality of the teaching context is the most important factor in his teaching, i.e., his course purpose and his students’ needs. Previous studies in EFL contexts from Li (1997) and Wang (2000) suggest that when teachers in their own contexts want to incorporate a communicative component into their traditional teaching methods, a framework for EFL contexts is necessary to be called upon. In addition to this, the authentic materials will be used in his future. He didn’t mention other characteristics that he will apply at this moment.

Where are his teacher's beliefs from

Jay talked about his beliefs from himself as a student, from himself as an English teacher, a graduate student, from his reading in SLA (second language acquisition), from communication with faculty, professors, and training. He said,

They come from training, the reality and the students, all of them. I buy some of the ideas. I don't believe all of them. Most of the parts, it is my way of learning English as a student. I believe in extended reading, good quality reading, read a lot, beliefs in input, and output (producing).

After these years, he thinks teachers should be compassionate, patient with students and exert the necessary effort. Most importantly he said is "to think about learners' needs," which is the reality of language learning in EFL contexts. He said,

Think of learners' needs. You don't stop looking for professionalism. Don't need to be pessimistic. You need to be realistic. I have strong beliefs in perseverance and efforts. Modify your teaching effectively. We should avoid extremes. Talking about teaching, you have to think about "context": ways and means to achieve your goals. No matter what I do, I have to think of the learners' needs.

Case 2: Lisa

Lisa got her bachelor degree in the Department of English and her master degree in TESOL in the U.S.A. She used to teach in two different schools. One was an institute of technology and the other was a business school in her country. The level of students' English was low and intermediate. She mentioned that some of the required textbooks were too difficult in content and structures for her students at that

time. She took courses relevant to methodology in teaching during her undergraduate studies. During her master program, she took “Methodology in ESL” and “Second Language Acquisition.” She did thirty-hour observations in a semester while she was studying in TESOL Department. From her observations, she learned a lot from those teachers. When asked about the “theory into practice,” she said, “It was useful. At that time we had to plan different kinds of lesson plans/planning. Our classmates were engaged in that demo. It helped me to figure out how to put those theories into classroom practices.”

An example of her class

An example of her General English from a business school is provided: Practicing simple sentences by using pictures as cues. She detailed the following as she remembered when she taught a conversation class of EFL beginners in one of her classes. Students were learning how to describe a house. She stated,

First, I taught them the places in a house, such as a bedroom, a kitchen, or a living room and so on. Giving them the pictures, I taught them how to say those words. Then they went to ask their partners, moving around to ask about the structures and noun vocabulary for substitute practice. The materials were designed by me. I used supplementary materials for the communicative approach practice.

For her business school students, the textbooks were too difficult in content and structures because the adult students were coming back to school in a program of continuing education after graduating ten to twenty years previously. They might not have studied English for ten to twenty years so she purchased another book that was

more communicative-approach-oriented for the students in the second semester. She made a decision to change the textbook within her authority in order to activate the practice of CLT.

The characteristics of CLT that she applied are as follows:

Lisa emphasizes the interactions between students and the chances to practice speaking English that students can have in class. She provided as many chances as possible for students to use their limited English to express basic ideas from daily life. The most important characteristics that she applied in her class are student interaction, student centeredness, and learners' needs. When asked which characteristics she applied most, she said,

First, it was student interaction. The activities students did. If they talk, without me talking, they need to convey their meaning by engaging in each kind of activities. They can't just escape, just listening and sitting there. Second, it was student centeredness. Third, communicative intention: they can talk all the time.

After that description, she then mentioned "learners' needs" as a factor in her teaching too, she said,

That's why I found it [CLT] very effective because their [her students'] proficiency was very low but when they experienced, they could use English to communicate even though they were just simple sentences. They could reply "yes." "no," "how many---" They found that they were learning something instead of just writing it on the test and [they] will never use it.

When asking about activities she used in class, she replied with the teaching philosophy in constructivism, which is in a language-learning setting where learners help each other to accomplish their tasks. She said,

In a CLT activity, advanced students can teach low-level students. For example, they will use L1 to help low-level students. Sometimes I think if they translate or explain to students. I think it's more effective than me to translate to the students.

She also used authentic materials in activities. She said, "Sometimes I might just have one copy (of authentic materials), but they still could get the sense of what it is." She valued the idea of authentic materials, because they reveal that students can conceive at least the images of what they were talking about instead of feeling blind in the listening and practicing situations.

Difficulties she had in applying CLT

Lisa's English proficiency is also near that of a native speaker. She had no difficulty in using English in her class. However, her difficulties came from students' low level in English proficiency. She stated, "Some students are at a low level [proficiency]. Even though it is just one sentence, they still can't produce that sentence." Besides, she also mentioned the schools' required textbooks greatly hindered her instructional application. Those required textbooks were not proper for the students' English proficiency level, but she had to follow all the guidelines to teach, and students needed to take a midterm and final based on the same texts. She said,

Some schools, they had required textbooks so if I didn't have any choice, I would pretty much cover these materials. And, they had monthly tests. Besides, the exam questions were not conducted by me.

She had taught for two years before she came here. She continued to say, "Actually I know that's not the school I want to stay forever, so I don't want to continue teaching. There were limitations, limitations from schools. We needed to use textbooks, which were required." The most obvious difficulties she had came from the school set-up requirement, even though she could apply the ideas she learned from the knowledge of CLT.

In the future, will she apply CLT in her teaching context

When she was asked, "Do you think CLT can be successfully applied in your teaching?" She replied with a positive and confident attitude ,

I think so. I will teach in a college. Most of the time, I will have my autonomy to do whatever I want. [In her past classes] I was trying to create interesting activities. I tried to let them forget they were in the classroom, because I wanted them to enjoy the class. So everything or each topic I came up with I think at least it should be interesting for that classroom.

Though she did not talk a lot about applying CLT in her future, she shows us her ambition to apply what she had learned previously from her study and how successfully she could demonstrate what she learned from her training in ESL/EFL methodology.

Where are her teacher's beliefs from

She valued her experiences from training but she especially valued her teaching experience from reflections. She has her own interpretation in adopting methods or theories. She said,

“It’s [training] useful, but you still need time or you need a model for you to transfer all the knowledge. At that time [during training], we tried to plan lessons, which was useful for me to think how I was going to do. But only when you go to the classroom and you know how difficult your teaching is. Then you try to model yourself and adjust your own teaching.

Her own language learning experience in the classroom also influenced her teaching, but that was focused on her teachers’ teaching style not her learning style. Her memories and observations from her teachers’ teaching style influenced her thinking about teaching. She said,

During my undergraduate studies, my teacher used more student-centered in our class compared with my high school classes. . . . If I as a teacher feel bored, I can’t teach anymore. I just like to create interesting classrooms.

Lisa’s practical knowledge in teaching is mirrored by Borg’s (1998) study that states, “A teacher’s pedagogical system [is] shaped by educational and professional experiences in his life.”

Case 3: Tom

Tom taught in a private institute of languages for preparing students to achieve good proficiency in English. He also taught a conversation class in a high school for a

semester, which was his part-time job. Classes he taught consisted of reading, speaking, listening, grammar, and English for entrance exams. The purpose of that reading class was to prepare students for a language proficiency test, which is an English proficiency test in his country. It's quite similar to the TOEFL test. The students' levels of English proficiency ranged from low to mid-intermediate. He took a number of courses relevant to English teaching during his undergraduate studies. One of his courses related to methodology in teaching was Psychology and Foreign Language Learning, which he said, "It was quite relevant to my teaching. It was similar to SLA. We talked a lot about behaviorism and cognition. We talked a lot of learning styles and strategies. It gave me some ideas a language learner acquire or learn a language." The other course was "Multimedia Application and Development." In this course, they had to design software for English language learners. At the end of that semester, their classmates had to create language software. Their teacher then selected software for effective teaching from their projects and distributed them via a CD-ROM.

The characteristics of CLT that he applied are as follows:

He provides me with his conversation and reading classes in this section.

In his conversation class, typically, he would do a warm-up activity, which he could start questions and then circulate the questions evoked from students. During the warm-up activities, sometimes students would initiate questions related to the original topics, which he viewed as a good idea to start a class. Then they could continue the class.

Students would say something related to the question [in the warm-up activity], which I think is very good. So they could expand their conversation. After the

warm-up activity, we could either follow the textbook or [I just] let students go through the activities that I designed for them.

When he was asked “What kind of activities would you use?” he replied “communicative activities, which included problem-solving activities, and then he said students needed to do group work. He said,

First, they could come from some communicative activities. I had them discuss some topics in pairs or some topics in groups or I would have them solve the situation. For example, I brought some questions, some difficult question for them. And then I divided them into groups so students in groups discussed the solution and [I would see] how they were going to do with these situations.

He dealt with low-level students by making the group work easier for the students to work together. His technique in facilitating lower proficiency students is to provide visual aids for students to develop speaking process during speaking and student interactions. He said, “For the low level class, I would usually bring pictures for them and have them describe what was going on in this picture.” Obviously, the techniques he used for low proficiency students were all aimed at easing students’ pressure and anxiety.

In his reading class, his usual activity was to bring in an article, and the article could be some advertisement in a newspaper or newspaper articles. Then he cut the article into, for example, five parts and then divided students into groups. Students in each group then looked at these five pieces of reading and their task was to put the reading in order. It is kind of jigsaw puzzle activity. The newspaper articles and

advertisements he used, which are relevant to daily life, are authentic materials to students' life. He said,

I think I did incorporate this approach into my class. I liked students to work in pairs, in groups so this was one idea that is taken from CLT activities. I used a lot of authentic materials so I think it was also one idea from CLT.

When asked about "What type of materials would you name 'authentic' materials?" he replied, "For example, newspapers, magazines or those kinds of materials or reading materials from the Internet are authentic materials I used."

Difficulties he had in applying CLT

He replied, "Generally speaking, I didn't find things particularly difficult, except for [preparing] authentic materials." When he was talking about this difficulty, it meant that he needed to spend time searching for "authentic materials," which are appropriate for students' proficiency levels. In addition, he gave me another example to explain how he handled his situations with lower level students. He would provide the students with easier tasks for them to accomplish. This task is similar to what we just saw from Lisa's techniques to help her low proficiency students to participate in communicative activities.

At first, I found it might be difficult for low-level students to participate in either pairs or groups, but I think the problem should be based on what they are going to do in their pair or group discussions. For low-level students, I could have them do some easier tasks.

In the future, will he apply CLT in his teaching context

His answer was positive. From his previous experience, he had sensed the resistance from students, but I can see he will try to overcome this constraint based on what he replied in the following. He emphasizes that teachers can work on knowing more effective activities that would work best for students to interact and what materials would be authentic for students.

Yes, I think CLT can be successfully applied to my EFL classes and those classes could include reading, writing, listening or conversation classes. By focusing on students, teachers will know what students think about or teachers can know what kind of activities work best for them and bring some authentic materials students can find materials more relevant to their personal experience so that they can apply their personal experience. Also, by providing them appropriate assistance, I think that students will lower their anxiety level and make their learning more meaningful.

He continued to express what he thinks about his future teaching. Though difficulties may still come up from students' limited exposure to this approach, he still can try his best to do his job. He said,

Yes, I will incorporate CLT in my teaching. No problems. The only trouble would be some students resist this kind of new approach. They prefer the traditional one. Or they are used to the traditional one and when they are not open enough to accept another alternative approach, so I think they would kind of resist this kind of approach.

Where are his teachers' beliefs from

His teachers' beliefs came mostly from his past learning experience, and some would depend on his past experience as a teacher. "The courses taken will influence my teaching, but they have very limited possibility," he said.

When I was a student in class, I liked to observe some activities that teachers used. I would evaluate them whether they are useful or whether they would be effective for me or not. Or could this particular activity create very positive learning atmosphere? If I think those activities are very positive, I will use definitely those activities for my future.

Tom and Lisa both revealed their beliefs coming from their learning experience and their observations from their teachers' instructional activities. Successful and effective classroom instructions do provide these two teachers with models of good teaching.

Discussion

How do teachers implement CLT ideas?

Jay used authentic materials from magazines, journals, and the students' specialized field in his class and he will use this kind of material in his future class because he believes authentic materials represent the area of students' study and therefore are good materials. He has his own interpretation of CLT, as he said, "The strong version is that you have to teach students to appreciate the fact that language had a system and you have to understand the system of the language, [which is] authentic and relevant to their fields." Richards and Lockhart (1996) state, "the systems of teachers' beliefs are founded on the goals, values, and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the

system in which they work and their roles within it.” In accordance with this, Jay believes that teachers can have their own interpretation of methodology in their teaching based on the values teachers hold for local students in language learning.

In Lisa’s classes, group work and meaningful communication were emphasized. Her characteristics of CLT are: student interaction, student-centeredness, communicative intention (through group work), learner’s needs and authentic materials. In the future, she will have more autonomy and she will try to facilitate students’ learning in a pleasant environment. She believes that she can successfully apply CLT in her teaching based on her previous experiences and her reflection on her teaching. She has her own interpretation of adopting methods or theories. She said, “It’s [training is] useful, but you still need time or you need a model for you to transfer all the knowledge. ... But only when you go to the classroom and you know how difficult your teaching is. Then you try to model yourself and adjust your own teaching.” This finding is what teachers reflect on after practicing their teaching. It is what Fenstermacher (1994) named, “the knowledge that teachers generate as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on these experiences.” Her expression and reflection also provide us with the view that Richards and Lockhart (1996) hold about the systems of teachers’ beliefs, which “are founded on the goals, values, and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching.” Further, these values serve as the background to much of the teachers’ decision making and action, and hence constitute what has been termed the culture of teaching (Richards and Lockhart, 1996).

Tom has formed a practice principle to use “warm-up activities” at the beginning of a class. He utilized a warm-up activity as a thread to invite a learner-centered discussion and then he expanded on the ideas coming from conversations

among students. He applied problem-solving activities, jigsaw puzzle activities, and students' presentations in his class frequently. In addition, he provided students with appropriate assistance in order to lower their anxiety level and make their learning more meaningful, which he recognized as a major factor to facilitate learners in language learning processes. He expresses a positive and confident attitude toward CLT and he thinks he can successfully apply CLT in his future because, as he said, "by focusing on students, teachers will know what students think about or teachers can know what kind of activities work best for them and bring some authentic materials students can find materials more relevant to their personal experience so that they can apply their personal experience." The ideas of student-centeredness are apparent.

Do teachers' beliefs inform their practical knowledge?

Practical knowledge includes practical principles and rules of practice (Elbaz, 1983). Practical principles are defined as rationales for the actions taken, and a set of beliefs and values that underpin the choice of action. Rules of practice were defined as clearly observed and formulated statements of action carried out in specific learning situations. These are the rules of pedagogy that are learned from experience. The data show that the three participants confirm what they have learned from their professional development and this informs insight for them to apply CLT ideas in their own context.

Jay's principle of using authentic materials in his class originated from his beliefs that they are good materials. He said, "I believe in extended reading, good quality reading, read a lot; beliefs in input, and output (producing). You have to write it. Write it correctly." During the interview, he mentioned he would provide authentic

materials related to his students' specific fields, as these would be the materials benefiting students' needs in their future. In addition, he believes his training in second language acquisition theory informs his classroom method. As he gained experience, he became more patient with students. He would facilitate comprehensible input more in order to wait for students' output and these ideas came from what he learned from course work and reading in SLA theories. Thus learner centeredness as he defined as learner needs became a priority in his teaching context.

Lisa's training and course work in her MA in TESOL serve as the framework for her instructional practice in her teaching context. However, she emphasized teachers' reflection and modeling in her own context. As she stated, "Only when you go to the classroom and you know how difficult your teaching is, then you try to model yourself and adjust your own teaching." The practical principles she formed are to give students as many chances as possible for them to talk in English. Her own learning experience with boring activities gave her insights for her decision making in creating an interesting learning classroom for her students.

Tom's beliefs also originated from his language learning experience and partly from his teaching experience. As he mentioned, "I like to observe some activities that teachers used." He then evaluated them to see if they were effective and useful for his own teaching context. He also mentioned a lot about activity ideas when he talked about his beliefs. These beliefs then served as his major practical principles in his class. As he stated in his typical conversation class, he would initiate an activity as an opening and use types of jigsaw puzzles or scrambling readings in his reading class. What he emphasized as CLT ideas during the interview can then be identified in his belief system.

Results from the three experienced teachers indicate that the beliefs, values, and knowledge underlying their teaching contexts inform their practical principles and rules of practices. The three participants expressed their beliefs from their own learning as students, as teachers, their training, and their values for students. This result confirms the summary of teachers' belief systems by Richards and Lockhart (1996), which are: their own experience as language learners; experience of what works best; educational based or research-based principles; and principles derived from an approach or method. However, these three participants did not show their beliefs coming from their personal factors. The fact that their beliefs inform their practical knowledge confirms what Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard's (1999) summarize above. It also echoes Fenstermacher's (1994) argument that practical knowledge is the knowledge that teachers generate as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on their experiences.

Conclusion

Perspectives and practical knowledge about CLT from the three experienced and competent teachers are valuable and encouraging for English teachers in an EFL context. The most important beliefs informing instructional practice about CLT are authentic materials, meaningful language learning, and learner centeredness, which are mentioned by all of the participants. Despite difficulties they had within their contexts and students, they all tried to form their own models of CLT, which is the most influential finding in this study. The reflection model of interpreting "theory into practice" in their own contexts is shown explicitly from the three cases. Without hesitation and frustration, teachers should try to model themselves and adjust their own teaching. We should "teach students to appreciate the fact that language has a system, and you have to understand the system of the language, [which is] authentic

and relevant to their fields” as Jay stated. Teachers should transfer theory into practice. As Lisa expressed, training is useful, since she had to transfer all the knowledge into her real teaching context. In Tom’s experience, when he facilitated learners’ needs, eased their anxiety, and made the learners comfortable in the learning environment, then he overcame his struggle with students’ resistance to CLT, which was his initial encountered constraint.

These three teachers show how their goals, values, and beliefs work in relation to the content and process of their teaching, and their understanding of the system in which they work and their roles within it. Clarifying the teaching contexts is important for each teacher as they face the true reality of teaching. Knowledge and beliefs are often hard to separate, as Pajares (1992) pointed out, both of which are indicated as parts of practical knowledge and are difficult to distinguish.

Implications

This study, inquiring teachers’ practical knowledge about CLT, addresses applications and problems of CLT by providing foreign language teachers and teacher educators with authentic descriptions of teachers’ thinking and actions. The three teachers in this study have professional background of language teaching and learning from theories and practice. These factors may contribute to the finding of this study, as they show positive practices in applying CLT. Professional knowledge in subject matters and teacher training should be equipped with foreign language teachers. Literature suggests that incongruence between belief and practice is an issue that should be addressed by teacher educators, so that teachers become better equipped to reconcile beliefs and practice in order to provide more effective instruction, which is evident in this study.

With the findings, this study hopes to suggest that teachers can apply the most possible characteristics of CLT in EFL contexts, and it hopes to reveal the possible difficulties that second or foreign language teachers might face. These difficulties might not be the same in different countries or subjects. However in-service or pre-service teachers should not hesitate to practice CLT in their careers. In Sato and Kleinsasser's (1999) study, the ir participants were Japanese teachers, applying CLT in Australia, and their research result was to facilitate the creation of a practical database for CLT. Thus, through the understanding of teachers' practices and knowledge, the study hopes to provide ideas for foreign language teachers and teacher education too.

Limitations

The results in this study were drawn from the analysis of interview data and part of participants' autobiographies. Due to the constraints of their present status as doctoral students for their professional development in the United States, classroom observations were not available. Different sources of data would serve better for data triangulization for further research.

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