

An Investigation of Nepalese English Teachers’ Perception of CLT and its Implementation in Nepalese Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate what Nepalese secondary school English teachers understand by CLT and what they think they are doing in order to teach the target language effectively employing the CLT methodology. The study addresses only the Nepalese teachers’ perceptions about CLT. Conventional methods such as questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and the inclusion of myself as research participant observer, were employed to collect the accessible data. The study identified what teachers think to do to practise CLT effectively and what aspects hinder them from implementing CLT effectively. The present study found that Nepalese secondary school English teachers do have a basic understanding of CLT and are potentially able and willing to carry out communicative classes. However, my findings suggest that teachers are restricted by a number of factors such as very limited in-service training, large classroom size, restricted teaching materials and excessive teaching hours.

Introduction

In the Western countries, the CLT approach has been in use for last three decades and has developed in a number of ways. However, in many Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and Nepal, it is still seen as a relatively new EFL teaching approach, with a limited impact on teaching practices in certain educational sectors (Li, 1998; Michell & Lee, 2003; Sata & Kleinsasser, 1999). It is not surprising to learn that, in Nepal, CLT was only introduced into the secondary school EFL context in 2000 (Rai, 2003; Sharma, 2003).

What is new as a CLT concept in these countries is a pedagogic approach that focuses on language as communication, rather than as an academic subject. The main goal of CLT is not to help the learner to pass examinations but to develop the learners’ communicative competence (CC). The main focuses of CLT could be defined as i) language teaching through developing learners’ communicative competence and ii) ‘developing procedures for the teaching of four language skills that acknowledge an interdependence of language and communication’ (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 66).

In the modern CLT teaching approach, the roles of the teacher have expanded from being a provider of information and rules, to being a facilitator of the communication process, classroom participant and observer, researcher, needs analyst, a student counsellor, and a group organiser (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Knight, 2001). The changing duties of the teacher reflect the changing outcomes of the learners. Mitchell (1994) suggested that in a modern language teaching approach, priorities are given to the needs and the interest of the individual learner and the aim of teaching is to facilitate learning, but not to control the learning process.

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In theory, when using CLT, it is assumed that teachers will utilise certain roles that complement the approach. However, it may not always be true that teachers fully understand the potential of these roles and practices: it is very important to understand what teachers actually believe and practice in their classroom (professional life), since these beliefs will influence their teaching (Raths & McAnich, 2003).

Furthermore, research on language teacher's thinking suggests that teachers tend to develop their knowledge and understanding in the course of their reflective practice (Borg, 2003). A number of areas have been identified as those through which teachers develop their language teaching principles e.g. through their 'underlying beliefs or personal theories the teacher held regarding the nature of the broader educational process, the nature of language, how it is learned and how it may be best taught' (Breen et al., 2001: 472). The educational process here can be understood as the teacher or professional education which shapes trainee (inexperienced) teachers' beliefs, and programmes which ignore the teachers' earlier beliefs may be less effective at forming the later beliefs. Similarly, 'how it is learned' refers to a language learning experience where language teachers form and develop their language learning beliefs by reflecting on their own language learning experiences. Finally, 'how it may be best taught' relates to the extended language teaching experience where language teachers constantly reflect on their own practices (Borg, 2003; Breen et al., 2001; Milton et al., 2000).

Bailey et al. (1996) also investigated the factors relating to positive language learning experiences. They identified the language teacher's attitude to teaching plays a more significant role than simply language teaching methodology. Teachers who are caring and committed, have clearer expectations of their learners, thus helping them to discover their learners' interests and motivations for learning language; teachers need to show their respect towards the learners as much as the learners show respect to the language teachers; learner's motivation to learn language is more influential than teaching technique; and finally the positive classroom environment facilitates language learning.

Borg (2003) reviewed a wide range of research articles on teachers' attitudes to beliefs on language teaching and has used the term 'teacher's beliefs' to mean the language teacher's cognition and has characterised language teachers' cognition as prior to the language learning experience, teacher education, and classroom practices. According to Borg, language teacher's cognition is an unobservable cognition component of teaching such as what teachers know, believe and think.

Teacher development programmes looking at reflective practice or teachers' beliefs or the research on teaching, for example, help to shape teachers' professional practice. According to Borg (1998), teacher development programmes such as reflective practice, encourage teachers to become aware of and analyse their own performance; in so doing they broaden their practice. Furthermore, the programme which incorporates teachers' classroom behaviours and the rationale behind them are particularly influential. Furthermore, teachers' practice is shaped by their beliefs about ELT and the role beliefs play in teaching. In addition, teachers develop their practice more effectively when they are given opportunities to analyse lesson transcripts (reflecting on their own practice) and by examining other teachers' reflective discourse (*ibid*).

The correlation between theory and practice is an important area of research. Nunan (1989) concluded that even among teachers who were highly qualified and trained and had clear goals for communicative classes, only few opportunities were created for genuine communication in the target language. This suggests that discrepancies exist between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom performances. Li, for example, (1998) identified a number of constraints teachers came across regularly while implementing CLT in the EFL Chinese context. Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) suggested that even when teachers had participated in pre-service or in-service CLT programmes, there were a discrepancy between teachers' understanding of CLT and the researchers. In this present proposed study, it is essential to find out the teacher's knowledge of CLT, their beliefs about CLT and their practices and beliefs in applying CLT.

However, it is uncertain whether non-native English language teachers in Nepal have a similar understanding of CLT and their practices in their daily professional life. Firstly, EFL teaching and learning traditions have been restricted in Nepal for almost three centuries in the upper primary to secondary school level as one of the core modules (subjects). Secondly, as English is taught as a foreign language, learners get very little or no opportunities to practice in real life situations. Furthermore, teaching materials are semi-authentic and they are specially written for Nepalese school level learners. Finally, English language teachers in Nepal are non-native.

Research context

The CLT approach to English language teaching in Nepalese secondary schools is relatively new, implemented in 1990s along with new textbooks which were supplemented by teachers' guide books and audio cassettes. A new English language testing system was designed to ascertain students in the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing for the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) level exam.

Only a few evaluative studies are available. These studies claim that CLT has not been practiced effectively. For example, Rai (2003) has claimed that reasons for the lack of effective CLT practice are due to Nepalese teachers' inadequate competence in English and the lack of sufficient supplementary teaching materials. Similarly, Sharma (2003) has produced a comparative study between Australian adult English second language learning classes and Nepalese primary schools. Her study reported that secondary school English teachers in Nepal have a greater reluctance in designing supplementary teaching materials and English teachers' willingness to design and adopt supplementary materials which foster CLT. However, her study did not recognise fundamental distinction between Australian native English teachers and Nepalese non-native English teachers. The above studies do not provide enough supported data to sustain these claims as true in

all instances and they do not incorporate teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices.

Of the few studies on the development of CLT in Nepal, none has integrated or focused on teachers' perspectives, understanding, or classroom practice of CLT. It is very important to recognise teachers' belief, understanding and their classroom practices as they are the one who deliver everyday lessons. Through in-service training, peer observation, seminar and action research, teachers develop their beliefs and effective and comprehensive practices.

The study

In order to understand teachers' perception, knowledge, and practices about CLT, I employed triangulation that included qualitative and quantitative data sources of secondary school English teachers' perspective. The research tools used in this study were a) a questionnaire survey; b) semi-structure follow up interviews; and c) the researcher as a participant observer. 44 teachers from 25 different schools in Kathmandu and 38 teachers from private schools and 6 teachers from government-aided schools were included in this study. Their teaching experience varied from 2 to 22 years and the majority were teaching at secondary level.

Thirty-five out of the 44 survey participants volunteered for semi-structure internet (MSN) interviews. Four were chosen according to their interest and willingness in taking part in the study, which reflected both sexes, variety of teaching experiences, teaching settings (government-aided and private) and CLT or language teaching training. This information was based on the completed questionnaire.

In this study, the content analysis method was used to examine data, as the survey and the semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit teachers' views, understanding, beliefs, and classroom practice in CLT classes. As a result, the analysis had focused on the content of participant's responses and ignored any language accuracy issues.

Findings

The findings of this study were guided by the original questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews as they were designed considering the CLT theories. As a result, the findings were categorised into five broader areas of participants' academic qualifications and language teacher training; classroom size; teaching materials; actual classroom practices; and teachers' views of CLT.

Participants' academic qualifications and language teacher training

The findings showed that there were considerable differences in the profiles of teachers regarding their qualification, and training in the government-aided and the private sectors. All the government-aided school teachers in this study had some training either short or long-term training or professional qualification in ELT or they simply had a teacher training degree or a Master Degree in English Literature. These teachers also completed short-term training in ELT from NELTA. This suggests that all the government-aided school teachers in the capital city are well qualified in teaching EFL, however things are very different outside Kathmandu. Moreover, those who took part in this study were likely to be more motivated, and so this result may not be representative across all the schools, or all teachers in the capital.

Surprisingly, the research data revealed that some of the private sector teachers neither had short nor long-term training in ELT. The majority of the teachers held a wide range of qualifications and professional training which varied in the length from two days workshops and conferences to up to three years degree in education and some of them held a degree in English literature. However, five out of 38 had not attended any ELT training. Furthermore, there was one participant who had not had any specific English language or teaching qualifications. He only held an intermediate graduation in Commerce (equivalent to 'A' Level) and he had been teaching at grade 8 (year 8) for 18 years. It is therefore common to encounter untrained and unqualified teachers teaching English in some of the secondary schools in Nepal.

To sum up, the findings showed that in regard to academic qualification and training, the state school English teachers in the capital city were more highly qualified and trained than to the private school teachers. However, this does not guarantee that state sector education is better than private sector as qualification does not always represent the quality of education. Moreover, from the interview data, and my own observations as a researcher, it was found that most state school teachers sent their children to private school which suggests that the private sector provides better education. The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) results consistently show that the private sector gets better results than the state sector. In addition, even teachers who were highly qualified and trained, and had goals for communicative classes, still created very few opportunities for genuine communication in the target language (Nunan, 1989).

Classroom size

The survey and interview data confirmed that the classroom sizes were generally large in Nepalese secondary schools. Numbers ranged from 10 to 70 students; the average was 33. During the data analysis, it was found that there was a significant difference between the government-aided and the private sector. The average classroom size of government-aided was 55 students (ranging from 50-70). Data from the interviews revealed that even when teachers considered themselves confident and competent to conduct communicative classes, they were always impeded by the large class size. According to Nunan (1989), the ideal class size is 15-20 students, but the study found this to be impossible in the Nepalese government-aided schools where classrooms were overloaded by student numbers.

However, in the private sector, class sizes were considerably smaller than those in the state sector. The study showed that the average state sector classroom size was 30 students (ranging from 10-50). This was approximately half the size of the state school. The class size varied from school to school and the interview data revealed that even in the private sector, class size was still one of the

main constraints that teachers regularly face during communicative classes. This suggests that even 30 students were too many for effective communicative language teaching, confirming Nunan's (1989) observations.

There are a number of reasons for the significant difference in class size between the two settings. Firstly, the research found that there were very few government-aided schools in Kathmandu and too many private schools. Secondly, within the capital city, there are large numbers of well educated and well off parents who believe in private sector education and have no trust in the government-aided sector. Moreover, this research was only based in Kathmandu and here the population has grown rapidly, while the provision of government-aided schools has not kept pace. Therefore, even though there are relatively small numbers of illiterate and less well off parents, there are not enough government-aided schools, resulting in much bigger class sizes in such schools.

Teaching materials

Our English textbook was taken by practitioners as the 'bible' of language teaching in Nepal and it was developed by the Department of Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education, in line with the National Nepalese Secondary School Curriculum of Nepal. Almost all the participants (43/44) reported that they used the state supplied textbook. However, there were some concerns from the practitioners that *Our English* was not adequate on its own and needed to be supplemented with other textbooks. In contrast, practitioners who used *Our English* found that it helped learners to develop interactive skills in English, and demonstrated the communicative and functional aspects of language. Moreover, the language of the textbook is simple and manageable, and it encourages learners to use the target language inside and outside the classroom.

The majority of the participants reported that students appreciated the communicative approach to learning, the practical activities and the accessible and simple language. They claimed that students found *Our English* very important, relevant, and

enjoyable, and because the SLC exams were based on the current textbook which was in line with the national Nepalese Curriculum, students feel confident and motivated.

The study confirmed that the 'textbook' had integrated all four language skills, with a focus on communicative competence. It was also found very few, or no authentic texts as the textbook was adapted to the Nepalese foreign language teaching context. However, teachers thought themselves competent enough to use the textbook and learners seemed to enjoy and be motivated to learn the target language. Even so, some teachers felt it was bad practice to rely heavily on the textbook, and some of the teachers were found to be designing teaching materials and encouraging learners to get involved in generating materials. There was a concern from teachers on the long teaching hours. This suggests that the government should cut down long teaching hours and provide teachers with specifically allocated time to design teaching materials.

Furthermore, most of the private and all the government-aided schools were provided with very basic supplementary teaching materials such as teachers' guide books, cassette tapes, and most commonly 'language activities books' in the capital. This study revealed that teachers understand the importance of varied teaching aids, and the problems they face by a lack of them. To resolve this, teachers should be encouraged to use locally available materials such as newspapers and magazines published in English. In addition, schools should be provided with more funding to buy teaching aids.

Classroom practices

Traditionally teaching in Nepal has relied on a very teacher-led model, in which the teacher stands at the front of the class and the pupils learn either by taking diction or by rote learning. This research supports the suggestion that this is now changing.

This study revealed that many Nepalese teachers are not simply restricted to a traditional Asian approach to teaching and there is an increasing understanding of CLT whereby students play an active role in the learning and teaching processes.

In the interactive classroom, the majority of teachers recognised the importance of the dominance of English, based on the understanding that the maximum use of the target language enhances language acquisition. In Nepal, most of the private schools compel their teachers to use English as a classroom language across the syllabus, while in English classes Nepalese (L1) is strictly banned. In addition, students came from the middle class family background and most of the parents were educated and knew the value of English. As a result, learners had a good understanding of English compared to government-aided school learners.

However, the situation in the government-aided school was very different as teachers preferred to use both Nepalese (L1) and English (L2) as the classroom language. Unfortunately, most of the state school learners belong to low income background and generally most of the parents are illiterate and hardly understand the need and the value of learning English (Bhattarai, 2001). The research data revealed that the use of L1 to students with lower language proficiency helped the learner to understand what was happening in the class and as a result students can be motivated in learning and see the objectives of the lesson. This could reflect lower language proficiency in many government-aided schools, so that to help learners understand the target language, culture and people, teachers may have to use L1 so that students remain motivated.

Teachers' views on CLT

The present study revealed that the CLT approach was viewed very positively by secondary school English teachers as they believed that CLT was a very practical approach to language teaching as it provided maximum opportunities to the learners in foreign-language learning settings. The research data confirmed that the majority of the participants preferred to provide a task/activity to a group, as practicing language in a group promotes the development of learners' language proficiency as they get more opportunity to share their ideas, views, and experiences within the group and they learn from each other. While working in a group,

learners were encouraged and motivated to share their ideas to the class as learning is viewed as a joint work and learners are expected to contribute to the group as much as they gain (Breen & Candlin, 1980). However, only a few participants recognised the link between group work and the kind of teaching that CLT promotes, that is the 'learner-centred' approach to language learning and teaching.

Richards and Rodgers (1986) argue that the maximum use of different tasks encourages learners to take part actively in pair or group work, and that this provides them with the best opportunity to communicate using the target language. There are four main tasks/activities which are commonly used to enhance CLT: problem solving; information-gap; discussion; and role play. The research data showed that the classroom practitioners from the private sector favoured all these different activities/tasks than that of the government-aided sector. From this, it is clear that even though government-aided school teachers were well qualified and trained, their practice was limited than the private sector. It confirmed the previous claim that teachers' qualifications do not always guarantee the quality of education.

Conclusion

Findings of this study confirmed that the Nepalese secondary school English teachers involved saw themselves as well informed and competent when conducting the CLT classes. However, it also revealed that there are a number of factors which restrict these teachers from pursuing the CLT approach effectively in their classroom. These are: very little in-service training; large class sizes, restrictive teaching materials; and long teaching hours.

It was found that the learner-centred approach to language teaching was perceived as important by most of the teachers, even those who had not had any training in the CLT approach. More surprisingly, some teachers who had recently completed CLT training still restricted themselves to the traditional 'teacher-centred' approach. This would be very interesting area to develop further research, through classroom observation, as it may be that teachers'

classroom performances differ from their beliefs and understanding. Milton et al. (2000) proposed that teachers develop their principles and beliefs through pre-service or in-service training and from their own classroom practice, though these experiences may not always be observed in their classroom performance.

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