# AN INVESTIGATION OF THE USE OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach of teaching English as a Foreign Language. Although CLT is regarded as an effective way of teaching English, the implementation of CLT teaching approach in China is not fully carried out. Hence, this study attempts to investigate the extent to which CLT is implemented in the English class at the Diploma level at a higher education institute in China. It is also to find out the challenges in implementing CLT in the English class. This study employed the qualitative approach design. Data was collected through teachers' interview and classroom observations. By utilising purposive sampling method, four Chinese English teachers from the English Department participated in this study. The findings indicate that the English classes are still teacher-centred and the teaching materials are not communicative. The implementation has been challenged by several factors such as class size, lack of training in CLT resulting in misconceptions of CLT, and teachers' lack of English proficiency. The findings of the study provide some measures that can be taken to address the challenges.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the study

Communicative language teaching (CLT) or popularly known as the 'communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages' is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasises interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. This approach emphasises the concept of 'student-centred' learning. The basic principle of CLT is communication, in which the learners are required to use English

to complete communicative tasks that resemble real life's activities. In the implementation of CLT, the role of the teachers has now changed from that of classroom controllers into knowledge guiders, with the emphasis on developing students' communicative competence. In order to improve students' comprehensive ability of thinking, interpersonal communication and creativity, the role of the teacher needs to be changed (Richards and Rodgers, 2001), just as the traditional teaching methods are to be re-examined to improve students' learning and expand on teachers' repertoire of pedagogical skills.

Presently, CLT is becoming increasingly popular and regarded as a dominant mode of education worldwide. It is viewed as the most comprehensive way of teaching English and is very highly regarded in the field of ELT. Richards and Rogers (2001) believe that in language teaching there is a need to focus on effective communication rather than mastering linguistic elements.

In China, students learn English as the main foreign language and there are more than 250 million Chinese who have been learning English (Chen & Hu, 2006). It is also the main foreign language taught at the tertiary level and is used in the communication with foreigners. Hence, there is a need to introduce and implement the teaching of English using the CLT approach in China.

In 1999, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a revised syllabus that emphasises on college EFL students' communicative competence (Li, 2011) by giving preference to CLT as the main medium of instructional in colleges. Since then, numerous reforms on curricular designs and teaching methods had been carried out. Moreover, the State Education Department has set teaching of Chinese English learners' communicative competence since 1992 as the ultimate objective pedagogically within the constraints of the new English language teaching syllabus. As English is the lingua franca in this globalised world, the importance of acquiring the language cannot be ignored. China, in the words of MacArthur as cited in Fang (2010), has a lot to gain economically. In order to propel the use and development of CLT, the Ministry of Education in China inaugurated the *College English Curriculum Requirements* (2007), which aims to develop the ability of the students to use English and interact with other speakers of English internationally. Besides being able to convey information effectively through both the spoken and written mediums, they will be able to develop the ability to learn independently and improve their cultural quality to address the rapid changes taking place politically, socially and economically at the international level in China (Fang, 2010).

Unfortunately, the practice of CLT in China did not provide the expected results. (HU, 2010). Many problems and challenges have emerged in the implementation of CLT. Firstly, CLT encountered great resistance from college teachers and learners such as the perceptions of teachers' roles and ways of learning and teaching (Hu, 2002; Rao, 1996). The students are heavily influenced by the traditional education culture and the teachers lacked CLT experiences (Liao, 2004). Gulnaz, Alfaqih and Mashhour (2015), claimed that the limitation of teachers' English proficiency level and the lack of experience in using CLT made it very difficult for CLT to be implemented.

Furthermore, almost every student wants to speak English like a native English speaker, but they encounter numerous challenges in learning English. One of the challenges is the reason why students learn English, which is purely to pass exams such as College English Teaching (CET) exam (Fang, 2010). Apparently, the current state of English teaching methods has not been very successful in achieving the goal of improving students' communicative competence although CLT has a positive impact on teaching English in Chinese colleges. For instance, as highlighted by Fang (2010), even though some universities had shifted their focus into developing the students' communicative competence, the issues of 'accuracy' and 'fluency' and the deep-rooted mentality of the need and importance of passing and obtaining good grades in the examinations still persist.

## Research Questions

Q1.     To what extent is CLT implemented in the English class at the Diploma level?

Q2.     What are the challenges that the teachers faced in implementing CLT in the English class at the Diploma level?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides the literature review of CLT. The second section points out the challenges faced in implementing CLT. The third section shows the related studies in the implementation of CLT that mainly describe the study of CLT used in China and the challenges that researcher found in implementing CLT.

## Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT method emphasises the concept of "student-centred" learning. It also emphasises the meaningful interaction among language learners for the purpose of real-world communication (Brown, 2007). Contrary to the teacher-centred method, CLT regards teachers as knowledge-giver and learners as receivers, with a social relationship between them reflected in CLT. According to Brown (1994), this student-centred method enables students to have a greater sense of autonomy in their own learning and improves students' motivation to learn English. Besides, Brandl (2007) states that CLT focuses on the need for learners using English to partake in meaningful exchanges that relate to their personal experiences and past encounters.

Richards (2001) further reiterates that one of the notions of CLT is that a learner of a second language needs to execute different functions which are instrumental, representational, interactional, personal, heuristic and regulatory. Richards (ibid) points out that CLT starts from a language communication theory and it is the most comprehensive approach to implement teaching tasks. He also points out that the main objective of language teaching and learning is to develop teaching strategies to enhance the learners' four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing of language in order to develop communicative competence.

## Challenges faced in the implementation of CLT

### CLT training

Liao (2000) points out that teachers' competence in teaching is closely reflected by the quality of classroom teaching. Consequently, the most important thing is that education administrators should conduct teacher training for teachers to equip them with in depth knowledge and expertise in using the CLT approach. Liao (2000) strongly feels that the lack of CLT training for English teachers is one of the reasons why CLT is difficult to implement in EFL class. According to a research by Gamal and Debra (2001), most of the EFL teachers agree that the lack of training and exposure to CLT is an obstacle to the successful implementation of CLT such as the limited real life's tasks and resources that are necessary in conducting communicative language activities in the EFL classroom.

### Class size

The size of the class is also one of the reasons that affect the implementation of CLT (Lin, 2007). In large classrooms, besides the large number of students, the desks and chairs that cannot be moved also hinders the maximum participation of students and the successful implementation of communicative activities such as group discussion and role-play. Ning (2011) agrees that class size makes CLT implementation difficult in the EFL classroom. In addition, many EFL teachers hold a negative attitude towards the teaching of English in large classes because it is very tedious and laborious to organise classroom activities. Class control is lost, and communication becomes very difficult in such a chaotic classroom environment. In addition, Ying (2010) points out another problem which is evident in large classes. Some students sitting in the back row find it very difficult to communicate with the teachers effectively which inadvertently affects learning from taking place for these students in the back row. If things continue this way, students sitting in the back of the classroom will begin to lose interest to participate in the class activities.

### Grammar-based examination instruction

Grammar-based examination instruction is another main factor resulting in the difficulty in implementing CLT in EFL classroom. Incecay & Incecay (2009) state that although the students realised the importance of communicative activities, there is the worrying grammar-based exam that the students need to pass in order to progress to another level in their course

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of study. As a result, most of the students lose interest in these activities as they are more concerned with the grammar test. Subsequently, grammar-based examination is considered the major obstacle to students' quest to acquire the English language. The students are more motivated to obtain good results in the grammar-based test. They channel their effort in securing good test scores in the grammar-based test and neglect putting effort in CLT activities in the classroom.

## Related studies on the implementation of CLT

With China's Reform and Opening Policy in the 1990s, many educators realised the importance of developing English communicative competence. Sun (1989) explains that foreign language teaching has been considered of great importance by all levels of education departments and has also been 'shaped' by this perception. Fang (2010) states that developing students' communicative competence is the goal of CLT. The CLT method has been well popularised in universities and colleges. Many researches show that learners begin to hold positive attitude on CLT.

According to Wang and Cheng's (2009) research, among 236 English teachers interviewed, 73% of these EFL teachers said that CLT is a useful method to develop students' English communication ability and 68% of EFL teachers are satisfied with CLT approach rather than Grammar-Translation Method. On the other hand, some studies point out that there are also challenges in implementing CLT. Zhao (2013) explains that although CLT teaching method can improve students' communicative competence, there are only a few teaching materials being used to implement CLT in the class. Brandl (2007) also points out that for teachers, it is also a challenge of how to test students' communicative competence. Although CLT teaching method can develop students' comprehensive communicative competence, there are still many constraints in the implementation of CLT.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

The qualitative approach design was used in this study. Firstly, the qualitative approach (classroom observation and interview) was used to find out to what extent CLT is implemented in the English class at the Diploma level. Secondly, it was also used to find out the challenges in implementing CLT in those English class at the Diploma level.

### Research Instruments

The qualitative data collection instruments used in this study involved teachers' interview and observation checklist. For teachers' interview, the researcher adapted 14 questions from Badger and Yan (2008). The teachers' interview and classroom observation checklist were used to find out the challenges in implementing CLT in the English class. The classroom

observation checklist was adapted from Sandra and Gomez (2014) to observe to what extent CLT is implemented in the English classroom.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Research Question 1: To what extent is CLT implemented in the English class at the Diploma level?*

This section presents the findings to answer Research Question 1. It presents the qualitative findings from the classroom observation checklist and teachers' interview. Table 1 is a list of the coding used to present the findings. The quotes in italics are taken from the interview data and presented 'verbatim' without any editing of language.

**Table 1: List of Coding**

| Types of Data | Individuals |
|---|---|
| **CO** - Formal classroom observation | **T1** – English teacher |
| | **T2** - English teacher |
| **CI** - Conversational interview | **T3** - English teacher |
| | **T4** - English teacher |

### Materials and Activities

Tsou (2005) points out that some of the factors to improve students' speaking competence and increase interaction in the English classroom is by using extra teaching materials and encouraging students to participate in class activities. Richards (2006) also explained that teaching materials and activities play a very important role in CLT.

**Table 2: Materials and Activities**

| No. | Items | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Does the teacher use authentic materials such as newspaper and magazine articles? | 0% | 100% |
| 2 | Does the teacher only use the prescribed textbook in his classes? | 100% | 0% |
| 3 | Does the teacher use the prescribed textbook with extra communicative activities? | 100% | 0% |

| 4 | Does the teacher divide the students into groups and use pair work or group work? | 50% | 50% |
| 5 | Does the teacher use role-play activities and learning games? | 0% | 100% |
| 6 | Does the teacher use information-gap and problem-solving activities? | 0% | 100% |

The findings in Table 2 show the usage of prescribed textbook which was reported as significantly more as compared to the use of authentic materials. All the four teachers (100%) only used the prescribed textbook. None of the teachers (0%) used authentic materials in the classroom. In addition, the teachers possess a negative attitude towards the use of extra materials (CO T1, T2, T3, T4). This can be seen from the interview with the four teachers.

> *"The textbooks now fully meet the needs of teaching, so I have no other teaching* materials." (C1 T1)

> *"...the difficulty level of the textbook articles has been a headache for students. If I look for other teaching materials, it will be counterproductive."* (CI T2)

When asked about the attitude towards the use of extra materials, T3 and T4 presented similar view.

> *"I will not use extra teaching materials in class, but I will read some online research on how to improve students' writing skills, and then apply these methods to teaching activities. In class, I just teach according to my own curriculum plan."* (CI T3)

> *"There are enough resources in the textbooks prescribed by the school for students to learn, and in the exams organized in the school, all knowledge points come from textbooks."* (CI T4)

According to the principle of CLT, the choice of materials must be taken into consideration in order to improve students' communication competence and encourage students to take part in communicative activities. Richards (2001) points out that 'the most salient feature of CLT is that everything done in the English classroom is done with a communicative purpose.' From classroom observations and interviews, it was noted that the four teachers did not realise this basic principle, and also did not realise the importance of materials in CLT teaching method. They used only the prescribed textbook in the English language classroom. The prescribed book does not meet the students' needs to understand how language is used for communication in real life situations. In CLT, the use of extra materials is necessary because the contents of the prescribed textbooks are not enough to meet the students' communication needs in the real-life situations (Richards, 2006).

In other words, the use of additional materials will greatly promote students' interest in learning. Karwan, Mahta, Lin & Ahmad (2016) believe that interesting teaching materials can increase students' interaction resulting in greater speaking gains. However, none of the

four teachers (CO T1, T2, T3, T4) advocated the CLT approach. They never use extra teaching materials, which will enable the students to communicate in English under real life situations. Neither did they provide students with opportunities and strategic exercises to develop their communication skills. This method of using only the prescribed textbooks cannot transfer what students have learned in the class to the outside world. Thus, if students want to learn language successfully, the teachers must consider the choice of materials and design materials carefully. This finding is consistent with Li (2006) who found that teachers rarely use additional teaching materials in the teaching process because they think the required textbooks have met their daily teaching needs in the English classes in China.

The next finding uncovered in Table 2 concerns the usage of activities in the English language classroom. What is interesting about the data is that two of the teachers (50%) use pair work or group work to teach while the other two (50%) do not. All the four teachers (100%) do not use other teaching activities such as role-play activities and learning games (CO T1, T2, T3, T4). The teachers basically considered these classroom activities as a waste of time and students will likely discuss other things that are not related to the subject.

> *"Sometimes they will have group discussions, but most of the time I do not want them to do so, because it is a waste of time, and sometimes the students will discuss things that have nothing to do with the subject."* (CI T1)

Regarding the usage of activities in the English classroom, T2 stated that:

> *"No, because according to the needs of the course, they don't need to discuss in groups. They just need to read the articles, and when they come across words they don't understand, I can translate them or let them look up the dictionary by themselves."* (CI T2)

Other responses to this question include:

> *"I will let them have group discussions after class and not let them discuss in class, because I need to let them master more writing skills in limited time. If they discuss in class, it will waste a lot of time, and I can't control what they are discussing."* (CI T3)

Larsen-Freeman (1981) claims that activities that are truly communicative have three features in common; information-gap, choice and feedback. During the feedback, the exchange is communicative, and communication take place. However, the four teachers only use activities such as vocabulary spelling, grammar correction provided by the textbook. They did not give extra communicative activities for the students to practise. In the process of communicative language teaching, students (interlocutors) have the opportunity to choose what to say and how to say them. However, all the exercises provided by the teachers always emphasize and vocabulary, which are controlled activities because students have no choice of form and content (CO T1, T2, T3, T4). Therefore, it is difficult for students to improve their communicative competence.

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Furthermore, the teachers encounter problems and difficulties implementing CLT in the English class. A research done by Liao (2000) states that most of the Chinese teachers in the English classroom do not carry out communicative activities. Liu (2006) states that although the teachers realised the importance of communicative activities, they still do not prepare more teaching materials, and all the class activities are still taken from the textbook provided.

The English language teachers too, hardly give feedback to students. They mostly emphasise only grammar and vocabulary activities. These findings are in agreement with Zhang's (2009) study which finds that there is a lack of communicative activities in the English language classroom. This is a feature that is conspicuously missing in the English language classroom throughout China as well, accounting for the reason why Chinese students possess little or no communicative competence at all.

In a nutshell, if teachers are adamant in wanting to implement CLT in the Diploma English language classes in China, they must consider the importance of communicative activities. Communicative activities can improve students' communicative competence and strengthen students' speaking ability.

**Teacher's Role in the Classroom**

In CLT classrooms, the teachers must play the two roles, namely, the role of a facilitator and that of a monitor (Richards, 2006). This is supported by Gulnaz et al., (2015) who argue that the role of the teacher is deemed to be important in any teaching-learning situation because it is central to the situation in which the classroom environment develops.

**Table 3: Teacher's Role in the Classroom**

| No. | Items | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Does the teacher divide his classes into groups according their language proficiency? | 0% | 100% |
| 2 | Does the teacher use cooperative and interactive learning in his classes? | 0% | 100% |
| 3 | Does the teacher focus on fluency rather than accuracy? | 0% | 100% |
| 4 | Does the teacher respond immediately to the students' errors? | 100% | 0% |
| 5 | Does the teacher correct the students' errors when they speak during English class at the end of the lesson? | 0% | 100% |

From Table 3, it can be seen that all four teachers (100%) did not divide their classes into groups according to the students' language proficiency and did not use cooperative and interactive learning in the English classes. Item 3 reveals all the four teachers (100%) always

emphasise accuracy-based activities especially for vocabulary and grammar practice. In addition, the four teachers (100%) correct students' errors immediately when the students make mistakes. The following are the responses from the interview:

> *"In class, the teacher does not group the students according to their language ability. When the students encounter words or articles they do not understand, the teacher interprets them in Chinese, and immediately corrects the students' errors after the students make mistakes."* (CO T1, T2, T3, T4).

When asked about the teachers' role inside the English classroom, the participants were unanimous in their views, that is, their role is more like the role of teachers in Chinese traditional teaching such as knowledge-giver, interpreter and controller.

> *"I think I'm more like a classroom controller. I need to control students' behaviour, classroom discipline, etc. I don't want my class to get out of control. Because it's going to be very bad for my teaching."* (CI T1)

T2 stated that she is a knowledge-giver in the English classroom.

> *"In my class, I think I am just a knowledge-giver, I need to impart knowledge to my students, so that they can learn more."* (CI T2)

In addition, the teachers thought that only when the teachers occupy the dominant position in the classroom, they can have control over the classroom. The teacher controls the discipline and the behaviour of the students and does not conduct communicative activities for the students in the teaching process. They do not consider the English language as a tool to learn, instead it is only to help students master the knowledge for examination purposes.

> *"Classroom supervisor, I need to supervise the proficiency of students' knowledge but also to monitor whether students can complete the exercise well. Generally, I think teachers must play a major role in my classroom, only in this way, in order to better grasp the classroom situation."* (CI T3)

Another finding reveals that the teachers explain too much in class, whether it is the meaning of words or grammatical structure, the teacher is involved in too much interpretation work, which makes the teacher taking over the role as an interpreter (CO T1, T2, T3, T4). The teacher talking time has exceeded the students' talking time which contrasts with providing more opportunities for the students to practise the language.

T4 highlights an issue which is in line with Ning's (2011) study which found that the role of the teacher in the English classroom in China is more like a controller or interpreter rather than that of a communicator or facilitator.

> *"My role in class is an interpreter, I need to explain the meaning of the article, explain the meaning of words, explain grammatical structure and so on, through which students can better understand knowledge."* (CI T4)

Larsen-Freeman (2010) points out the teachers' roles in the teaching and learning process is equally important. In addition, the type of activities and techniques they use in the classroom are indicators of the application of a teaching method. This means that the teachers should not just play a single role in the English class. The role of a teacher should change according to the teaching activities.

The four teachers believed that the activities provided by the textbook are enough. They rarely encourage students to participate in communicative activities as they place more importance over classroom discipline and control of students' behaviour. In addition, during class practices, the role of teachers should be as an advisor to answer students' questions and monitoring students' performances.

Richards (2006) states that teachers should be regarded as a communicator and engage with students in negotiating the meaning actively. But all the four teachers focus on accuracy of language when students were doing grammar and vocabulary exercises. Their role is more like that of a rectifier.

> *"Must accuracy. Because the current educational environment in China is like this, students are not concerned about their language ability, they only care about their final exam results, thus, after they give me the answer, I will only consider the accuracy of their answers, which is very helpful for their exams."* (CI T1)

In addition, this view was echoed by T2.

> *"Accuracy. Because I need them to find the right answers, which will cultivate their ability to read articles and summarize. In addition, it is also helpful to improve their examination results."* (CI T2)

Other responses to this issue included requirement by the teaching plan and avoiding misunderstanding.

> *"I think I put more emphasis on accuracy, such as grammatical accuracy, spelling accuracy and so on. Because it's stipulated in our teaching plan."* (CI T3)

T4 stated the reason why he emphasises accuracy.

> *"Accuracy. Even though I know that communication should focus on fluency, I need to emphasize the choice of vocabulary for students all the time. You should know that communication with foreign customers can lead to misunderstanding if words are not used properly. Thus, I emphasise accuracy."* (CI T4)

In general, from the classroom observations, the lessons were found to be teacher-centred. In addition, all the four teachers did not incorporate the use of cooperative and interactive activities. Instead, they insisted that the students use certain grammatical structures provided by the teachers. This is not in line with the freedom of choice as advocated by one of the basic assumptions of CLT which is to communicate using whatever little knowledge of the language they possess.

**Teaching and Learning Process**

Richards (2006) mentioned that CLT is an example of student-centred learning which places students at the centre of the teaching and learning process, teaches comprehensive skills, and focuses on cultivating students' communicative competence. Table 4 presents the findings about the teaching and learning process taking place inside the English classroom.

**Table 4: Teaching and Learning Process**

| No. | Items | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Communicative activities focus on meaning | 100% | 0% |
| 2 | Practical conversation is used to achieve communicative competence. | 0% | 100% |
| 3 | Conversation is taught in real life situation | 50% | 50% |
| 4 | Conversation is applied in cooperative and collaborative learning (e.g. work in group, in pairs). | 0% | 100% |
| 5 | Conversation is taught through interaction between students and teacher and students and students. | 0% | 100% |
| 6 | Dialogue is used to achieve communicative competence. | 0% | 100% |
| 7 | The teacher encourages students to take part in the activities. | 0% | 100% |
| 8 | The teacher uses English for classroom communication. | 0% | 100% |
| 9 | The teacher uses the students' L1 (Chinese) for classroom communication. | 100% | 0% |
| 10 | The teacher considers language as functions or form. | 0% | 100% |
| 11 | The teacher explains the meaning of words' in English. | 0% | 100% |
| 12 | The teacher explains the meaning of words' in the students' L1 (Chinese). | 100% | 0% |

What is striking about the findings in Table 4 is that in all the classroom observations, the four teachers do not use CLT in their English language class. Firstly, the researcher discovers that the teachers use Chinese, their L1 to teach and they all use

Grammar-Translation teaching method in their classes. For example, the teachers use Chinese (100%) instead of English (0%) to communicate with the students. Secondly, the teachers explain the meaning of words' in the students' L1 (100%) instead of using English (0%). Only half of the number of teachers (50%) teach conversation in real life situation (CO T1, T2, T3, T4).

This is supported in the findings from the interview with T1 who stated that,

*"...because students' English ability is not particularly good. Most of the time in class is to translate them. As you can see in class today, many English words need to be explained to students in Chinese. Although I know it is not good for students' English ability, I can't help it."* (CI T1)

*"I always use Chinese in class, because I need to translate the textbook articles to the students thus, they can understand them easily."* (CI T2)

From the interview with T3 and T4, they stated that they use a mixed mode of Chinese and English instructions in the English language class. However, from the classroom observations, the researcher found that the teachers just read the content in English but make use of the students' L1 (Chinese) to explain meaning of the words or the article.

*"Chinese and English, because students' English levels are uneven, therefore, I will choose the most familiar language for teaching activities. But some articles or words, I need to read out in English, so that students feel that we are taking an English class, not a Chinese class. In addition, I will explain the meaning of these articles or words in Chinese, which is very necessary."* (CI T3)

The response from T4's shared the same view. When teaching the class, T4 used

*"a mixture of Chinese and English... for example, I will describe a business scene in English and translate it to them in Chinese, which will help students understand the knowledge."* (CI T4)

The four teachers did not subscribe to Richards' (2001) view that language function is more important than form in CLT. Instead, they focus on grammar and vocabulary. Their EFL courses are conducted mainly based on the grammar-translation method (GTM). (CO T1, T2, T3, T4)

From the interview, the four respondents commented that they will focus on language form rather than language function.

*"Most of time, I place more importance on language form because most teachers in China still want to help students get good grades, language form is our first consideration, which requires students to master grammatical*

*structure and the meaning of words, which are required by the Chinese
examination system."* (CI T1)

*"I think language form stay in the main position in my class. Because the
content of it requires matches my syllabus. Moreover, if I consider language
functions, students will encounter great difficulties."* (CI T2)

T3 and T4 argued that with the impact of the Chinese examination system, most of
the students focus on how to pass the examination and to achieve better results. Besides, as
the students do not possess the fluency to express their views, the teachers can only focus on
language form in the teaching and learning process.

*"I consider language as form. As you have observed in class, students'
English ability is not very good. They do not use English well to express
their views or ideas, thus, I can only teach them grammar through
language form."* (CI T3)

*"It must be language form. In my teaching experience, the reason for the
poor communicative competence of Chinese students is that they dare not
speak in English, which makes them unable to use English to express their
ideas. In addition, students are not interested in communicative activities,
they only think of how to pass the exam which leads our teachers to pay
more attention to language forms than language functions in the teaching
process."* (CI T4)

One of the basic principles of CLT is that the four basic skills (reading, writing,
listening and speaking) must be learned at the same time in the English language class. The
classroom observation exposes the fact that the four teachers tend to emphasise reading and
writing only, rarely practising listening, and neglecting the developing of speaking skill, even
though there is one lesson (Business Communication) which was designed to train students
to develop their communicative competence. Even in the 'Business Communication' class,
the teachers seldom ask the students to practise using the English language.


***Research Question 2: What are the challenges that the teachers faced in implementing
CLT in the English class at the Diploma level?***

This section presents the findings to answer Research Question 2. The following are the
findings and discussion regarding the challenges or issues faced by the teachers in
implementing CLT in the English language class at the Diploma level.


**Class Size**

The first issue raised concerns the class size. According to Ning (2011), class size makes
implementation of CLT difficult in the EFL classroom. Many EFL teachers hold a negative
attitude towards the teaching of English lessons in large classes because it makes organizing

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classroom activities very difficult while class management gets out of control and difficult for the learners to engage or communicate with each other.

Based on the classroom observation, all the classrooms are very large with approximately 30 to 40 students in each classroom. Seventy-five percent of the classrooms have 31 to 35 students. And 25% of the classrooms have 36 to 40 students. None of the classes has less than 25 students (CO T1, T2, T3, T4).

The four teachers stated that the large class size is one of the main constraints that prevent them from making use of communicative activities and implementing CLT in the English language classroom.

This is evident from the interview with the four teachers.

"*I think classroom size is one of the reasons that hinders the implementation of CLT because the teachers need to give students a lot of opportunities to practice communicative activities. With large classroom, class management becomes almost impossible to handle. The students will not be focused and resort to doing something unrelated to the communicative activities.*" (CI T1)

"*I cannot implement CLT in classroom. But in my opinion, CLT is very difficult to implement in the classroom...There are almost 40 students in the classroom in all Chinese universities. If teachers implement CLT, they will lose control of the classroom.*" (CI T2)

"*In addition, CLT is suitable for small classes, not for large classes. Classroom size is also a problem restricting the implementation of CLT.*" (CI T3)

"*Large classroom is a major problem, because as far as I know, the premise of CLT implementation is small class, if implemented in an overly large class, there will be a lot of resistance, teachers will not be able to carry out normal teaching activities. And in all the classes I teach, the number of students is at least 35, thus, class size is a challenge for me.*" (CI T4)

The CLT approach entails teachers paying attention to each student's participation in the English language classroom and giving corresponding feedback. However, since all the classrooms surveyed in this study are large classrooms, it is difficult for teachers to pay attention to each individual student's participation in the activities that are taking place especially with students who are sitting at the back of the classroom. Class size is also considered as an issue as identified by Lin (2007) and Ying (2010). They found that large classrooms is one of the main challenges that affects teachers' ability in implementing CLT because if the classroom size is too large, many communicative activities cannot be carried out effectively.

**Lack of training in CLT**

Based on the interview, it was found that three teachers had not received CLT training. One teacher said that he had been trained but had not implemented the CLT teaching method in class.

The data collected from the interview also revealed that 75% of the teachers did not receive training in CLT. Only 25% of the teachers were trained. Responses from T1, T2 and T3 showed that they shared similar view.

> *"No, during my tenure as a teacher, I only received some training in traditional teaching methods, such as grammar translation teaching method. I believe that most teachers will still choose grammar translation as the main teaching method, because this is in line with the current situation of education in China, and students can also get more knowledge to help them pass the exam. As for the CLT teaching method, I'm not trained."* (CI T1)

> *"I have not received any training on CLT, but I have heard of this teaching method, which is very helpful to the development of students' communicative competence. However, I do not have the opportunity to be trained for CLT."* (CI T2)

> *"I have not received CLT training, but I have read about CLT research, which is a good teaching method."* (CI T3)

T4, however, gave a different view regarding this issue. He pointed out that it is difficult for him to implement the CLT in class due to the short training time and lack of basic theoretical knowledge of CLT.

> *"I was trained in CLT teaching three years ago, but this training lasted only three days and I didn't get a lot of knowledge about CLT. In addition, due to the lack of theoretical knowledge, I find it difficult to implement this teaching method in my class."* (CI T4)

Three out of the four teachers in this study did not receive any CLT training because they do not have opportunity. Although only one of the teachers had received CLT training, these trainings were unfortunately for only a short duration which resulted in the teacher lacking in basic CLT theoretical knowledge. Subsequently, they were not able to implement CLT in the English language classes. Thus, the lack of training in CLT is also one of the challenges encountered in the attempt to conduct CLT in the English language classrooms, which echoes Gamal and Debra's (2001) viewpoint. They state that many EFL teachers agree that the lack of CLT training is an obstacle to the successful implementation of CLT. They also believed that it has caused problems in the EFL classroom. Thus, the teachers must undergo in-service training in CLT if they want to carry out CLT in the English language classes. The teachers' incompetence is reflected in the quality of classroom teaching, and education administrators should conduct teacher training courses so that the teachers in EFL

classes could undergo training specifically in CLT to develop their teaching ability (Liao, 2000).

**Lack of CLT knowledge**

The findings from the classroom observations disclose that all the four teachers (100%) have never tried CLT in the English classroom. Their rationale regarding this issue was reflected in the interview (CO T1, T2, T3, T4).

> *"I have never tried CLT in the English class. Because in the class I need to complete the teaching task within the specified time. On the other hand, I even do not know how to apply this method."* (CI T1)

> *"No, although I know that CLT teaching method will be helpful to students' communicative competence, but in Chinese English classes, the purpose of most students learning English is only to pass the exam."* (CI T2)

> *"I haven't tried. The students' English proficiency levels are different. It's difficult for me to design a teaching plan for all students."* (CI T3)

> *"No, personally, I don't think CLT is suitable for English classes in China. Although it can develop students' communicative competence, but I have no chance to try it and I lack of theoretical knowledge of CLT."* (CI T4)

Even though many teachers think that CLT will help students to develop their communicative skills, they have not tried to implement CLT in the class for fear of the lack of theoretical knowledge and lack of opportunities to carry out the activities. In addition, they do not know how to implement it. The findings from the interview revealed that all the four teachers (100%) believed that accuracy is more important than fluency in the English language classroom. Meanwhile, 50% of the teachers stated that CLT emphazises communication as opposed to accuracy in language. These findings are in accord with other studies by Chang & Goswami (2011) and Vongxay (2013). They point out that most of the teachers in EFL context are unable to implement CLT in class because they do not have enough theoretical basis and expertise. Some teachers do not even know the basic principles of CLT. Thus, the lack of CLT knowledge is a challenge faced by the teachers in implementing CLT in the English classroom**.**

**Lack of English proficiency**

Based on the findings from the interview, all the four teachers assessed their English language proficiency as low as indicated by the following responses:

*"Another more important reason is that I feel that my English level is not very high, because I majored in pedagogy in university, I know how to better manage the class, but I am not confident in using English for teaching activities."* (CI T1)

*"In addition, my oral English ability is not very good, which is what I think is my defect as an English teacher. It's a flaw that bothers me too."* (CI T2)
*"This is an embarrassing problem for me, because my English is not good enough, sometimes my word pronunciation is not accurate, I do not want to expose this defect in front of the students, which will affect my authority in class."* (CI T3)

*"But you can also see that most of time I still teach my students with Chinese in the class, because I did not graduate with an English major, and my English level has not reached the standard that involves using English all the time in the class."* (CI T4)

The English language teachers are expected to be proficient and able to use the English language for conversational purposes before they can teach pupils how to do it. Consequently, teachers with little proficiency in the English language will lack the confidence in communicating in English, leading to inabilities and difficulties in developing communicative activities, and to conduct their classes entirely in English. The findings revealed that all the four teachers cannot use English to serve their conversational purposes.

Based on the classroom observation and interview findings, it was exposed that all the teachers claim that their spoken English is weak and that they lack English language proficiency to successfully carry out CLT. This explains why they are more inclined to use teaching activities that are traditionally used (grammar-translation method) in the English language classroom. This finding is in line with the findings of Li (1998) in a study on China.

**Teachers' misconceptions of CLT**

From the classroom observation, the main misconceptions of CLT include: relying heavily on speaking and listening skills, does not include the teaching of grammar and can only be used with pair/group work (CO T1, T2, T3, T4).

Half the number of teachers interviewed believe that CLT relies heavily on teaching the listening and speaking skills at the expense of the other main and sub-skills of reading and writing. In addition, the findings suggested that teachers' misconceptions about which language skills are the focus of CLT may be attributed to their definition of the terms 'communicative' and 'communication'. Wu (2008) argues that the different definitions and interpretations of CLT since the 1970s probably lead to the confusion in understanding the meaning of these terms among the teachers.

Seventy-five percent of the number of teachers believed that CLT involves no teaching of grammar. Wu (2008) attributes this belief by some teachers based on the

expression of 'fluency over accuracy'. He further explained that another reason for the reluctance of the teachers to use CLT to teach grammar was that grammar should be taught in a direct manner to enable students to comprehend grammatical rules.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from the classroom observations reveal that none of the teachers implement the CLT in the English language classroom. The classes are 'teacher-centred' and the teacher occupies a dominant position in the classroom. Firstly, all the four teachers only use prescribed textbooks without any communicative activities in the classroom. Secondly, from the class observation, the researcher found that the role of the teacher is a controller or translator. However, CLT teaching method considers the teachers as the facilitator or observer. It means that the teachers need to guide students how to learn more efficiently in the class and observe students' mastery of knowledge. Thus, the teachers' role needs to change from controller or translator to facilitator or observer by setting up the environment in which students can learn to learn (Kramach, 2006). Lastly, grammar-translation method still dominates in the English language classroom at the institute. CLT not only aims to develop students' communication ability, but also to promote the improvement of students' four language skills at the same time.

Large class size, lack of training in CLT, teachers' lack of English proficiency, lack the knowledge of CLT and teachers' misconceptions of CLT (Fang, 2010), are the main issues that hinder the implementation of CLT by the English language teachers in the Chinese colleges. With the reform of Chinese education undergoing rapid changes, the number of students entering college has increased exponentially year by year, which consequently led to an increase in the class size of Chinese colleges. Furthermore, CLT gained popularity very much later in China and Chinese education departments did not offer teacher training courses. Liao (2000) claims that the importance of teachers' training should be emphasised by the education department. Measures can be taken to address these challenges. The Education Department of China may need to carry out intensive teacher training courses to make the teachers understand the educational goals and objectives of implementing CLT and create a conducive environment for CLT in the Chinese colleges.

Future research on CLT implementation in the English classroom at the Diploma and Degree levels could be carried out on a bigger scale as the classroom observations and interviews conducted on the four college teachers may not be applicable to all the other college teachers in China. Furthermore, the beliefs and perceptions of the interviewees may not be representative. In addition, although CLT is well received since it was introduced to colleges on a nation-wide scale, it was not well used as a teaching method (Li, 2011). Future research could be expanded on the scope of the study to include the issue of cultural bias when learning a second or foreign language as communicative competency is influenced to a very large extent by cultural values and norms.

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