

THE TEACHERS' ROLES IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASSROOMS: A CASE STUDY AT NONG LAM UNIVERSITY - HO CHI MINH CITY

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Abstract. This study is to investigate whether EFL teachers at HCMC Nong Lam University (NLU) fulfill the four major roles in a Communicative Language Teaching classroom or not and which may prevent the teachers accomplishing these roles by interviewing 10 EFL teachers and conducting a survey on 324 students of those teachers' classes. After the data were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed, the research findings revealed that although the teachers completed the roles of participants and group process managers, the role of need analysts and facilitators were somewhat ignored due to the three major hindrances: the students' low level of English, large class size and multilevel classes. Based on these findings, some subsequently recommendations were suggested with the hope to partially solve these above problems at NLU as well as other universities in similar contexts.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, teachers' roles, EFL classes.

1. Introduction

The CLT was developed with the purpose to increase the students' communicative competence, which was defined by Hymes as "a knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing both the referential and social meaning of language" (Hymes, 1972). Since then, CLT has been the dominated English teaching method for 40 years now (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Littlewood, 2011). For that reason, teachers have been encouraged to apply the CLT to EFL classes at NLU since the 1990s. To successfully applying the CLT, teaching materials have been revised many times to create the authentic environment, and teachers are well-prepared with this method. However, despite this educational policy, it is likely that many students cannot communicate or function well in the real contexts. While there have been many researches on the other hindrances such as students' motivation, class size, and so on, the role of teachers received little attention. In order to achieve the objectives above, two research questions were formed as follows:

1. To what extent do the teachers fulfill their roles regarding the CLT in EFL classes?
2. What prevents teachers from fulfilling these roles?

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

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2.1.1 Principles of the CLT

According to Richards and Rogers (2001), Darn (2005), Richards (2006), Wu (2008), Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011), and Littlewood (2011), the language teaching method is considered as the CLT when it follows these principles below.

- CLT is the student-centered teaching approach in which students are provided opportunities to develop both accuracy and fluency, but fluency is more important than accuracy (Richards and Rogers, 2001).

- Students grasp the language used by native speakers in reality thanks to authentic textbooks (Littlewood, 2011).

- Communicative skills such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking are combined together through the common CLT activities such as pair work, group-work, role-play, games, using pictures and clips to modify the lesson to help students get used to communicating the real language (Richards, 2006).

- Teachers are required to be tolerant of students' errors since "Errors of form are tolerated during fluency – based activities and are seen as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills" (Larsen- Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 164). For this reason, the teachers should "note the students' error during fluency activities and return to them later with an accuracy-based activity" (Larsen- Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 164).

- Teachers also have to reduce teacher talking time and maximize the use of second language but make sure that students can understand the lesson (Darn, 2005; Wu, 2008).

2.1.2 The teachers' roles in CLT classrooms

To follow these principles above, the teachers need to perform different roles in the class (Littlewood, 1981). Two major roles that the teachers has to fulfill in CLT classroom are a facilitator of the communication process and an independent participant within the learning group (Breen and Candlin, 1980). More specifically, Brown (2001) later identifies the four main roles of a teacher in as a facilitator of the communication process, a need analyst, a counselor, and a group process manager.

First, as a facilitator, teachers can help learners plan and carry out their own learning such as setting objectives, selecting materials, evaluating their learning so that they can acquire skills and knowledge to implement the above things. Fulfilling this role requires teachers to take three sub-roles: a language model, a co-communicator, and a controller (Harmer, 2007). Second, as a need analyst, teachers determine and respond to learner language needs by analyzing students' learning style, learning assets, and learning goals to prepare the lessons. Besides, the role of counselors requires teachers to illustrate an effective communicator to maximize the meshing of speaker intention and hearer interpretation, using paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback. Last, as a group process manager, teachers have to monitor, encourage, and suppress the inclination to supply gaps in lexis, grammar, and strategy (Finochiaro and Brumfit, 1983; Littlewood, 2011). Also, teachers should note the gaps to give comment or practice later. At the end of the activities, they point out alternatives and extensions and help the group to correct the discussion by themselves.

2.1.3 Hindrances to the application of CLT to EFL classes

The success of the application of CLT principles is also affected by some outside and inside factors (Mai, 2017). Richards and Lockhart (1996), Brown (2000), and Harmer (2007) point out some major difficulties such as the teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards a language and language teaching method, teachers' quality and personality, students' motivation, students' beliefs and attitudes towards learning a language, students' anxiety, classroom conditions, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, textbooks, syllabus, and testing and evaluation.

In Vietnam context, the major difficulties in applying the CLT are related to students, the educational system and teachers (Bock, 2000). Firstly, regarding the difficulties related to the institutions, some researchers pointed out that the traditional tests which check students' reading skills, vocabulary and grammar partially decreased students' interest in CLT activities in EFL classes (Ngoc, 2012; Dao and Truong, 2018). Secondly, Nguyen (2009) found out that the Vietnamese students' culture of learning also affected the students' attitude toward accomplishing the tasks given by the teacher. Regarding the teachers' roles, Pham (2007) claimed that the gap between teachers' belief and practices was one of the major hindrances of applying the CLT. The way teachers interpreted the principles of CLT affected the CLT activities they conducted in their classrooms (Pham, 2007). Ngoc (2012) also indicated that English teachers' still keep the traditional role of the language teacher as a transmitter of knowledge. Meanwhile, Freeman et al also indicated that the teachers' proficiency in English was one of the obstacles to the success in developing the students' language skills (Freeman et al, 2015).

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the Center of Foreign Studies, NLU. The participants included 10 EFL teachers of the Center of Foreign Studies, NLU, and 324 students who enrolled in the course AV1 in the first semester of the school year 2017-2018.

2.2.2 Research instrument

The study was carried out with mixed-method design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to find out communicative activities implemented by teachers and investigate the teacher roles in EFL classes at NLU.

A 13- item questionnaire was given to 324 students in 10 EFL classes with the aim to explore the students' observation of teachers' performance in class and to investigate the teacher roles through the students' view.

A 10 open-ended question interview was designed to gain teachers' views on their communicative activities applied in class, their performance during class activities, the hindrances they have to face when implementing the CLT, and their recommendations for improving the teaching quality.

2.2.3 Data collection & procedures

The data were collected at the end of the academic semester to ensure both the teachers and the students could have overall opinions on the teaching and learning in EFL classes, NLU.

The data analysis was conducted to address the research questions of the study with the connection of quantitative and qualitative methods. Data gathered from the questionnaire were fed into the computer and analyses were carried out using tables, charts and graphs and percentage followed by interpretation and brief discussion. The interview data were recorded and transcribed using content analysis technique, which can be described as drawing up a list of coded categories and each segment of transcribed data into one of these categories to support the finding from the questionnaire. Then conclusion and recommendation were given based on the findings obtained from the research work.

2.3 Data analysis and discussion

2.3.1 Communicative Activities Implemented by Teachers in EFL Classes

Qualitative findings

From the notes taken from the interview stage, it is clear that most teachers think they employed the CLT activities in class. The majority of participants (eight out of ten teachers) let

the students cooperate with one another in pair work and group work, watch film, listen to music, and other communicative activities. In contrast, three teachers categorized repeating drills, doing information-gaps, and note-taking as the examples of CLT activities.

Table 1. Communicative Activities Implemented by Teachers in EFL Classes (N=324)

Activities	Central Tendency		Dispersion			
	Mean	Mode	Min	Max	Range	SD
Group discussion	3.4	3	1	5	4	0.69
Pair work	3.7	4	1	5	4	0.79
Role play	3.09	4	1	5	4	1.05
Games	2.65	3	1	5	4	1.02
Listening to audio tape and answering questions	4.19	4	3	5	2	0.44
Asking students to orally respond to any issue/topic	3.6	4	1	5	4	0.83
Using pictures/ clips to support the lessons	4.05	4	2	5	3	0.56
Others	1	1	1	1	0	0
Scale: 1= Never, 2= Hardly ever, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always						

In line with what has been found above, analysis of data from the survey revealed that almost most of communicative activities were applied in EFL classes since the students' response shown that listening to audio files and using clips/pictures to support the lesson were often applied in EFL classes (whose mean values were 4.19 and 4.05 respectively) while pair work, asking students to orally respond to an issue/ topic, and group discussion with mean values from 3.7 to 3.4 were at the next position, which proved that these activities were implemented sometimes in the class. However, with the mean value of 2.65 and the mode value of 3, the result revealed that the teachers somewhat ignored role play and games in class. A few number of student respondents answered that their teachers never conducted other activities yet the ones above.

2.3.2 Teacher Performance in EFL Classes

Data from chart 1 illustrated that the teachers developed the role of a counselor and a group process manager in EFL classrooms. 79.6% of students indicated that their teachers encourage students to take part in the class activities, 67% responses agreed with the idea that developing an environment in which the students worked cooperatively on group tasks was implemented, and 58.6% said that teachers move around the classroom to help the small groups and individuals when necessary. However, not many teachers realized the importance of analyzing students' needs in order to plan the lesson (34.6%), which showed that few teachers ignored the role of a need analyst_ one of the important teacher roles in communicative classes (Brown, 2001).

The research findings also showed that teachers somewhat accomplished the role of controller since 60.2% of them directly controlled the class when giving instruction. Nevertheless, not many teachers probably realized the role of a language model and partially fulfill it (42.3%). Besides, only 10% students answered that the teachers participated in the activities as if they were members as other students which meant that a small number of teachers realized the importance of the role of a co- communicator.

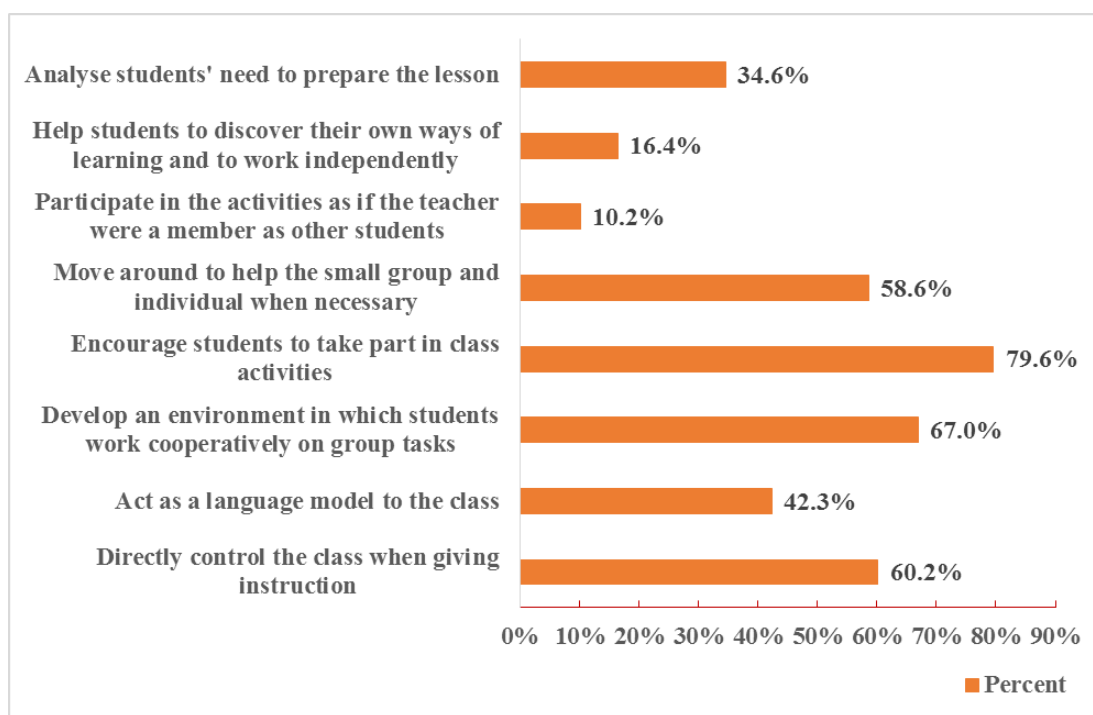


Chart 1. Teacher Roles in EFL Classes (N=324)

Last, the data in Chart 1 showed that only 16% teachers admitted having applied this teaching strategy. One of the principles of CLT was to emphasize fluency over accuracy, and with the emphasis on communication, students were required to discover the rules by themselves such as the grammatical rules (Richard, 2006). Thus, the teachers also had the responsibility to help their students discover their own ways of learning. However, this role was nearly ignored in EFL classes at NLU.

2.3.3. Hindrances preventing teachers from fulfilling their roles in EFL classes

Data from the interviews indicated that the teachers had to deal with many difficulties when applying CLT to EFL classes at NLU. Most of these interviewees named students' low – level English proficiency as one of the main barriers they faced in implementing CLT. Particularly, 5 teachers found it challenging to complete the teacher roles since the students had limited English structures and vocabulary to be involved in CLT activities, as one teacher said:

“The most difficulty problem when applying this method is the level of the students. Most of the time, the students do not understand what they are going to do and they have to rely on Vietnamese translation.”

There was also another interviewee who stated:

“Although all students passed the English examinations, their knowledge of English is still not enough; as a result, they hesitate in participating in classroom communicative activities.”

Meanwhile, other reasons they attributed to hindrances preventing them from fulfilling their roles included class-size and mixed-level students, and class setting. 5 interviewees referred to large classes as one of the obstacles to fulfill the CLT teacher roles. The interviewees mentioned that it is difficult to give every student opportunities to practice English in the classroom with about 40 students who are at different English levels. Also, it is more difficult to monitor classroom activities and approach each student because of the fixed arrangement of tables and chairs as teacher 1 commented:

“The tables and chairs should be changed in order to help the teacher approach every student, and the students can freely communicate with others.”

This idea can be found in teacher 3's response:

“How I can risk applying CLT if I have to teach 40 student sitting next to each other in an overcrowded room.”

Beside three major problems, the result from the interviews showed that the teachers also had problems with students' resistance of communicative activities, limited time to prepare communicative materials, unauthentic teaching material, limited class hours, and unreasonable curriculum.

3. Conclusions and implications

3.1. Conclusions

The study has made an attempt to better understand the extent to which EFL teachers fulfill their roles when implementing the CLT in EFL classes as well as the difficulties preventing teachers from fulfilling their roles. From the results, it can be concluded that the CLT was partially applied in EFL classes at NLU. As for the teacher roles, it can be noticed that the roles of counselors and group process managers were completed, but the role of need analysts and facilitators were partially developed. In term of major difficulties which prevented the EFL teachers from completing these roles at NLU, the research finding pointed out these were students' low –level English proficiency, large class size, and multi-level class.

3.2. Implications

The results of the study have shed a light on following implications for EFL teachers and administrators. Firstly, it is essential that the teachers need to satisfy the sub roles of facilitators which was not successfully implemented in the communicative classes at NLU. For the role of controllers, teachers should pay more attention to the way they give instructions since if they try to control the class the whole time of the communicative activities, they may shift to the teacher-centered method (Harmer, 2007). For the role of participants, sometimes teachers should take part in the students' discussions with the reasonable the amount of time to encourage the students be more active in the groups. More than that, teachers also should make the class atmosphere more enjoyable to enhance their students' motivation in taking part in the communicative activities.

For the role of a need analyst, teachers should analyze their learners' language needs to understand the student's perception of his or her learning style, learning assets, and learning goals with the attempt to determine their individual's motivation for studying the language. In that case, teachers may plan group and individual instruction that responds to the learners' needs.

Finally, to successfully implement the CLT in EFL classes, the major hindrances such as large class size and the multi-level of the students preventing the teachers from completing the role of facilitator should be taken noticed. It is expected that the educational administration should reduce the class size and organize placement tests so that the students can be placed in the class suitable to their English level. In addition, teachers can control the large class by online classroom management applications such as Google classroom, ClassDojo, TeacherKit, or Socrative Teacher to increase students' engagement as well as reduce the teacher overloaded paperwork dramatically.

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