

Polytechnic English Language Lecturers' Attitudes Towards The Teaching Of Communicative English

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the polytechnic English Language lecturers' attitudes towards the teaching of Communicative English, which has been introduced in 2010 in the current English syllabus. It also sets out to investigate the challenges the lecturers face in teaching Communicative English syllabus. Participants of this study were 15 English language lecturers teaching at Malaysian Polytechnics and the main mode of data collection was informal interview. Interview data were qualitatively analysed with initial descriptive codes being assigned to lecturers' responses. Results from the study indicate that the English language lecturers felt that the current Communicative English syllabus could help to prepare students for the workplace needs. However, issues related to students, institutional policy, non-academic tasks and professionalism were reported as challenges in teaching Communicative English courses. This study allows relevant authorities to identify the attitudes and challenges faced by English language lecturers and to facilitate these lecturers who are teaching the new Communicative English syllabus at Malaysian polytechnics.

Keywords: Communicative English teaching at Malaysian polytechnics, attitude towards communicative English teaching, problems in teaching communicative English

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysian polytechnics are one of the hubs to develop the nations' human capital. In the current inter-transformation phase, its image has been rebranded and improvised in line with the national plan in achieving vision 2020. The orientation of the teaching and learning practices in the polytechnics are mainly focused on technical and vocational education training (TVET). In addition, due to the rapid expansion of global communication and communicative needs of the industry, the English language courses offered at polytechnics have been changed from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to Communicative English (CE).

The new CE syllabus is based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) whereby it is designed to develop students' communicative competence in a wide variety of social interactions and authentic situations (Abdullah & Majid, 2013). The need to deliver CLT tasks in the classroom is important in order to increase the number of efficient workforce who can communicate effectively in English (Littlewood, 2007). However, although CLT has been widely adopted in various English language teaching context, a significant number of studies in the literature has highlighted various concerns and challenges related to CLT practices (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Ansarey, 2012; Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013; Littlewood, 2007; Sreehari, 2012).

Besides, Malaysian polytechnics have been implementing CLT approach through their CE courses for more than seven years now with an intention of producing proficient workforce. However, the application of CLT approach in Malaysian polytechnics has not led to desired outcomes of enhancement in polytechnic students' communicative competence (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Puteh-Behak, 2013). Furthermore, previous studies conducted in the polytechnic context found that traditional teaching methods are still prevalent in Malaysian polytechnics (Puteh-Behak, 2013; Yusof, Mohamad, & Zainorabidin, 2013). According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013), the relevance and effectiveness of a language teaching method depends on factors such as the context, institutional requirements, local culture and specific needs of students and teachers' beliefs. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to gain an in-depth understanding of polytechnic English language lecturers' beliefs about teaching CE courses and the challenges they face teaching CE courses in their classroom.

■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is defined as what a speaker needs to know in order to communicate in a speech community while competence is viewed as the fundamental knowledge and skill of language which is possessed by speaker-listener (Hymes & Competence, 1972). The concept of communicative competence requires knowledge of the language and the capability to use it in context. Besides being able to produce a grammatical sentence, speakers should be able to use it accordingly in various situations.

In order to acquire communicative competence, Hymes and Competence (1972) highlighted several aspects that should be acquired. First, “whether or not something is formally *possible*” is related to grammatical competence whereby it concerns whether a sentence is grammatically correct. Second, “whether something is *feasible*” concerns the practicality besides being grammatically accurate. Due to the limitation of human information processing, certain grammatical aspects cannot be part of competence. Third, “whether something is *appropriate*” relates to the suitability of the sentence to the context it is being used. Finally, “whether something is in fact *done*” infers that a sentence may be grammatically accurate, practical, applicable in context, but there is no possibility of the actual occurring taking place.

Communicative competence is a compound notion that involves language as well as other sociocultural sectors. It comprises not only the grammatical knowledge and linguistic structures, but also the ability to use appropriate language in different communicative situations. In addition, the linguistic features of a communicative exchange include the role of the speaker in a particular context, the roles of the other participants and a host of non-verbal communication cues such as distance, posture, gestures, facial expressions. Thus the development of communicative competence skills should be seen as a multifaceted and purposeful process that requires considerable pedagogical effort from English language educators.

2.2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which was first proposed in England and advocated by linguists like Michael Halliday and Dell Hymes is a methodology which emphasises on communication skills in language learning classrooms. CLT is a theory of language as communication, and its goal is to develop learners’ communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The two aspects of CLT are ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’. The first aspect of ‘what to teach’ gives more importance on language functions rather than grammar while the second aspect of ‘how to teach’ emphasises on “plentiful exposure and opportunities to language in use” to develop student’s knowledge and skills (Harmer, 2005).

The five features of CLT are: (i) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, (ii) the exposure to authentic texts in classroom learning, (iii) the opportunity for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process, (iv) an enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning and (v) an effort to relate classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom (Nunan, 1991). CLT is a learner-centred approach which provides students a sense of “ownership” of their learning and develops their motivation (Brown, 2001). In addition, CLT advocates students’ involvement in authentic communication through various activities. In this case, less importance is given to the accuracy of target language rather than successful achievement of the communicative task (Harmer, 2005). Learners play roles of active negotiator between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning. By this approach, learners not only contribute but also gain mutually (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Teachers teaching CLT have certain roles which are determined by the view of CLT. First, they are expected to facilitate the communication process among students and carry out various types of activities in the classroom. Next, a teacher has to act as an independent participant within the learning teaching groups. Besides that, the teacher is also expected to act as a resource, an organizer of resources, a motivator, a counsellor, a guide and a researcher (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Polytechnic English language lecturers who are now required to teach Communicative English have to adapt to the new role of CLT teaching methodology. The new CE courses which consist of three levels (CE 1 for semester 1 students, CE 2 for semester 3 students and CE 3 for semester 5 students) focus on speaking skills and aim to provide students with appropriate skills to participate in a wide variety of social interactions and situations (Abdullah & Majid, 2013).

2.3 Teachers’ Attitudes Towards CLT

There is a plethora of studies related to teacher’s views on CLT approach which have been carried out internationally. A mixed-method study was carried out to explore EFL teachers’ attitudes towards CLT in Taiwanese College (Chang, 2011). Data collected and analysed from the two phases explanatory mixed-method research design indicated that the teachers held favourable attitudes toward CLT approach and showed characteristics of CLT in their beliefs. In addition, the results also revealed that Taiwanese college English teachers believe CLT can make English teaching effective and meaningful.

Similarly a study (Lashgari, Jamali, & Yousofi, 2014) carried out in Iran reported findings that are alike. The results of the study indicated that generally, the EFL teachers held favourable attitudes toward principles of CLT and displayed characteristics of CLT in their beliefs and practices. Besides, not much gap was observed between the teachers’ beliefs toward CLT and their actual practices in the classroom. The majority of participants agreed with the use of CLT because this approach helps students improve their communicative competence and grammatical knowledge.

Another study which was carried out in Iran investigated the relationship between EFL teachers’ attitudes towards CLT and the perceived difficulties of implementing CLT in language classes (Rahimi & Naderi, 2014). The outcomes of the descriptive analysis also revealed that EFL teachers had positive attitudes towards CLT in general and specifically in group work in communicative classes. Additionally, while EFL teachers generally did not face any problems in implementing CLT in language classes, they experienced some difficulties in terms of the country’s educational system and its top-down curriculum approach. Moreover, the study found no significant relationship in terms of CLT attitudes and perceived difficulties of CLT implementation.

A recent study aimed at exploring the beliefs and difficulties implementing CLT in an EFL setting was carried out in Ethiopia (Yalew, 2016). Data were collected from both English language lecturers and students using a mixed-method approach. The study reported that although

most teachers' beliefs are positive about the use of CLT approach, their classroom practices are affected by several categories of difficulties. The four categories of difficulties which hindered the implementation of CLT were practical implementation difficulties of teachers, grammar-based examinations, educational system, and the nature of CLT itself.

The review of previous studies indicated that many English language teachers display favourable attitudes toward CLT and the teachers' views seem to shift to a more communicative paradigm. However, a number of studies point out the teachers' concerns and challenges about implementing CLT. Thus, it can be inferred that positive attitudes do not necessarily guarantee teachers' use of CLT approach in their practice. Inconsistencies between teachers' positive attitudes towards CLT approach and their actual classroom practice were revealed (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study is a small part of an on-going study involving polytechnic English language lecturers and their classroom practices. A qualitative approach was used to explore the attitudes and problems faced in teaching Communicative English courses at Malaysian Polytechnics. Purposive sampling method was used in selecting the respondents. The sampling method is influenced by access and willingness concerns. A total of 15 Polytechnic English lecturers were selected from the population. The sample consists of 10 female and 5 male lecturers. They taught CE courses at various polytechnics in Malaysia and had a range of 3 to 15 years of teaching experience. Apart from having a degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), seven respondents possessed Master's degree in TESL while another respondent was currently pursuing doctoral study in the same field.

Semi-structured informal interviews were used as the main data collection method for this study. The purpose of the interviews was to gain in-depth knowledge about English language lecturers' attitudes and challenges about the current CE teaching and learning practices. Each respondent was individually interviewed to gain an overview of their views on the teaching of Communicative English courses. Their feedbacks were then analysed by reading, re-reading and coding with initial descriptive codes being assigned to lecturers' responses. Figure 1 shows the process of basic qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2013) which was analysed traditionally using pencil and paper mode.

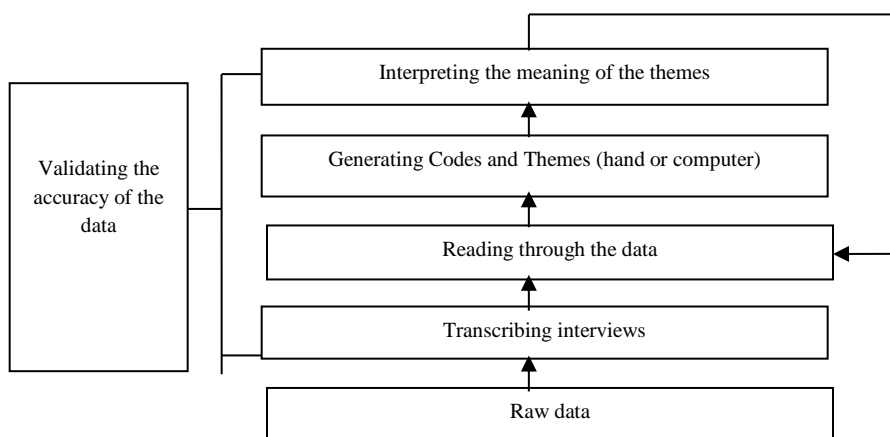


Figure 1 Steps of qualitative data analysis (adapted from Creswell, 2013)

■4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Attitude Towards Teaching Communicative English Courses

The results of the interview indicated that generally, English language lecturers had positive attitude towards the teaching of Communicative English (CE) courses. This particular finding of the current study was generally in line with the results of the prior researches mentioned in the related literature review (Chang, 2011; Lashgari et al., 2014; Rahimi & Naderi, 2014; Yalew, 2016). Specifically, most of the lecturers cited that the new CE courses could help prepare students to the communicative needs of the industry. As one of the lecturers put it:

The change of polytechnic English syllabus is timely since the industry requires graduates with excellent communication skills. The new syllabus could cater to the industry's needs.
(Lecturer C).

Besides that, a substantial number of English language lecturers believed that CE courses could help to develop students' communicative abilities and grammar through the use of target language. This corroborates with the study carried out in Iran (Lashgari et al., 2014) where most EFL teachers reported that CLT approach helps students improve their communicative competence and

grammatical knowledge. In addition, they felt that CE courses promote collaborative activities among students. The following are some of the related comments provided by the polytechnic English language lecturers;

CE courses are good for our students because the aim of this syllabus is to provide opportunity for students to communicate in the target language (Lecturer F).

CE courses integrates grammar components...students are exposed to grammar use in context. (Lecturer H).

CE courses enable us to carry out pair/ group activities to promote communicative skills...more student-centred activities could be carried out too. (Lecturer D).

Although majority of the lecturers showed favourable attitudes towards CE courses, two lecturers highlighted that there is a need to review the syllabus. Lecturer A mentioned that similar CE courses were offered to students across all majors (i.e. engineering, business, information and technology and hotel and tourism) thus, it is difficult to develop students' communicative skills based on their specific field. The need for English language lecturers to be aware and address polytechnic students' various trans-disciplinary content has been highlighted in other previous studies conducted in Malaysian polytechnic setting (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Sanmugam, 2013).

Furthermore, Lecturer E mentioned that although CE courses offered at polytechnics have been revamped recently, the syllabus still gives more importance to oral/speaking skills while other language skills like reading, writing and listening skills related to workplace communication are given less importance. In addition, Lecturer E further emphasized that CE courses, which are offered only for three semesters, should be offered every semester in order to provide more opportunity for students to be 'in touch' with the target language since the issue of graduate unemployment and poor communication skills are often raised by the industry.

4.2 Problems Related To Teaching Communicative English Courses

While the majority of the respondents stated positive attitudes towards the teaching of CE courses at Malaysian polytechnics, the teaching of CE, according to them, is not without any challenges. The following emerging themes are related to the problems reported by polytechnic English language lecturers in terms of teaching CE courses: (i) issues related to students, (ii) non-academic tasks (iii) institutional policy and professionalism. Similar challenges have been highlighted in previous studies reviewed in the literature (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Yalew, 2016).

4.2.1 Issues Related To Students

Issues related to students are the main concerns reported by the lecturers. Besides dealing with students' proficiency and negative attitudes towards learning CE courses, the respondents stated that they had to deal with students' poor attendance and large number of students. The following are some of the related comments provided by the respondents;

CE courses aims to equip students with relevant communication and presentation skills however many students in my class still could not speak well. I'm worried how they are going to face the real working world. (Lecturer I).

I have almost 50 mixed-ability students in my class and it's difficult to cater to their communicative language learning needs. It's a big challenge for me to teach them (Lecturer J).

The problem with my students is their attitude. They feel that CE courses are difficult and some regard it as unimportant since the credit hours are less. These students often skip classes, especially when the classes are in the morning! (Lecturer B).

4.2.2 Non-Academic Tasks

Next, concerns related to non-academic tasks were widely mentioned by the respondents. Lecturers mentioned that their unlimited job scope affects their professional practice. They further mentioned that besides assessing students' progress they need to carry out extensive paper works and filing, attend meetings, handle official events, organize student activities and participate in community service programmes. Thus,

these lecturers reported that they rarely have the time to plan for their classroom practices and often use readily available materials such as the modules to teach CE courses. One of the lecturers cited;

It's frustrating that we can't focus on our core task which is teaching because we rarely get the time to plan our lessons...we have so many other things to settle! I wish I had more time to prepare interesting lessons for my class (Lecturer H).

Although I know some of my students could not perform the given task I have to still move on because I need to complete the syllabus and the assessments within the time frame given (Lecturer B).

4.2.3 Institutional Policy And Professionalism

Lastly based on the interviews, concerns related to institutional policy and professionalism has been revealed. Among others, polytechnic lecturers are required to attend courses, participate actively in research activities and community service programmes, and collaborate with the industry in order to develop syllabus. Although English language lecturers' involvement in non-academic tasks expose them to administrative and management skills, it takes up most of their time and personal space (Abdullah & Majid, 2013).

Besides that, lecturers reported that they are required to implement the new CE syllabus and outcome-based teaching skills without proper training being given to them. All the respondents highlighted the need for trainings and resources related to the teaching of CE courses. Some of the comments provided by the respondents are:

We are required to attend so many courses however, very few are related to English language teaching practices (Lecturer J).

When changes are made to the syllabus, we are just briefed by the head of the programme. No proper training related to CE teaching is given and we have to look for our own resources too (Lecturer E).

It is clear that these lecturers are having hard time complying with the institutional requirements. Besides that, some of the lecturers mentioned that most of the time they are left on their own to make decisions related to their pedagogical practices. Therefore, based on the feedback given by the respondents, it can be implied that the institutional requirements and lack of professional development opportunities and teaching resources could deter English language lecturers from providing quality instructional practice.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study explored polytechnic English language lecturer's perceptions in terms of attitudes and problems related to the teaching of Communicative English (CE) courses. The findings of the study reflect the reality of teaching the new syllabus at the Malaysian polytechnic context. Generally, it was found that these lecturers hold a favourable attitude towards CE teaching. At the same time, the need to review the content of the syllabus has been highlighted considering the communicative needs of students from various fields and for the lack of emphasis given to other language skills such as reading, writing and listening. In terms of problems faced in teaching CE courses, issues related to the students, non-academic tasks, institutional requirements and professionalism were reported. Exploring polytechnic English language lecturers' beliefs and addressing their professional needs would result in positive changes towards the teaching of CE courses. Special attention should be given in terms of teacher training that provides in-service lecturers the opportunity to develop their skills related to the teaching of CE courses. Considering the limitation of the study in terms of sample size and data collection method, future study could be carried with larger sample using various data collection methods. Future studies may include students' views as well in order to gain a more holistic understanding. In addition, it would be interesting to explore the link between English language lecturers teaching attitudes and actual classroom practices related to the teaching of CE courses.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been teaching Communicative English courses?
2. What do you think about the change of polytechnic English language syllabus from ESP to Communicative English?
3. Do you think the new Communicative English syllabus could help to develop polytechnic students' communicative abilities?
4. What kind of communicative English language teaching techniques do you use in your classroom?
5. What problems have you encountered teaching Communicative English in your classroom?