

Language Teaching in Primary Schools

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a prominent English Language Teaching model in Malaysia. It is an approach to language teaching which focuses learners' need for developing communication skills. However, the implementation of CLT in the classrooms has proven to be difficult and needs to be revisited and re-examined again with careful and in-depth research. Thus, the present study hopes to investigate the implementation of CLT in selected primary schools within Kota Tinggi district in Johor. The study is hoped to provide insights on the teachers' perceptions, challenges, and expectations implementing CLT in the classroom. Based on a qualitative descriptive research design, data collected from the questionnaire and supplemented with interviews with a smaller group of teachers, will contribute in investigating the actual perceptions, challenges and expectations of the teachers in the implementation of CLT. The findings of the study will also contribute to the body of knowledge about Communicative Language Teaching, especially in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: *Communicative Language Teaching, Communicative Competence, Pedagogy*

Introduction

Communicative Learning Teaching (CLT) captures the attention of educators all over the world to cope with the 21st century language teaching and learning. Numerous studies have explored on the implementation and application of CLT in the classrooms (Mohamed Ismail & Normala, 2006; Faridah et al., 2011; Harison, 2012; Lee, 2001; Ozsevik, 2010). In Malaysia, the teaching of English has also transformed towards communicative approach based on current trend of globalisation needs. The industrial field need of worker that is able to be functional in English is rising. Students have also constantly been told that proficient English speakers can expect to have better access of knowledge, education and employment opportunities. It is also important to note that, learning English is not just to get good result in examination but to be able to function efficiently in speaking, listening, reading and writing using the target language.

Background

In 1980, the Malaysian curriculum underwent a transition in teaching English from traditional method to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in order to support learners' education development in tertiary level (Normazidah et al., 2012; Richard & Rodgers, 2004), to equip pupils with basic skills and knowledge of the English language for communication, both orally and in writing, in and out of schools (Ho, 2002), to prepare them for better career, good

pay, advanced knowledge, and for communication with the entire world (Thirumalai, 2002 and Noor Azina, 2011). The English Language syllabus aims to extend learners' English Language proficiency in order to meet the needs for everyday life, for knowledge acquisition and for future workplace needs (Malaysia Curriculum Specification Form 4). Thus, in 2009 the Ministry of Higher Education has taken a move to evaluate and review the English curriculum 'to produce more competent and marketable individuals to confront global competitiveness' (MOHE, 2011:1). It was an immediate call to revisit the implementation of CLT in schools.

Despite the strength of CLT as a potential approach in enhancing oral communication skills among learners, there are still students with low proficiency level in English Language. Malaysia is still facing secondary students who struggle in speaking skill (Mardziah, 2014). According to Tabitha (2013), students in the primary schools talk less when in small groups and most of the time lessons are geared towards getting students ready for examination. In secondary schools, teachers resort to explaining difficult English language passages using mother-tongue. Besides, effective language learning strategies are underutilised due to the pressure of getting good grades in the examinations (Normazidah et al. (2012). This phenomenon worsens when the learners reach tertiary level of education. It was found that the use of English is only limited to certain situations resulting students to be nervous and face difficulty expressing themselves in English (Nina Marlina, 2014; Radha, 2007). This ultimately leads to the shortage of English proficient industrial workers (Sarudin, 2013)

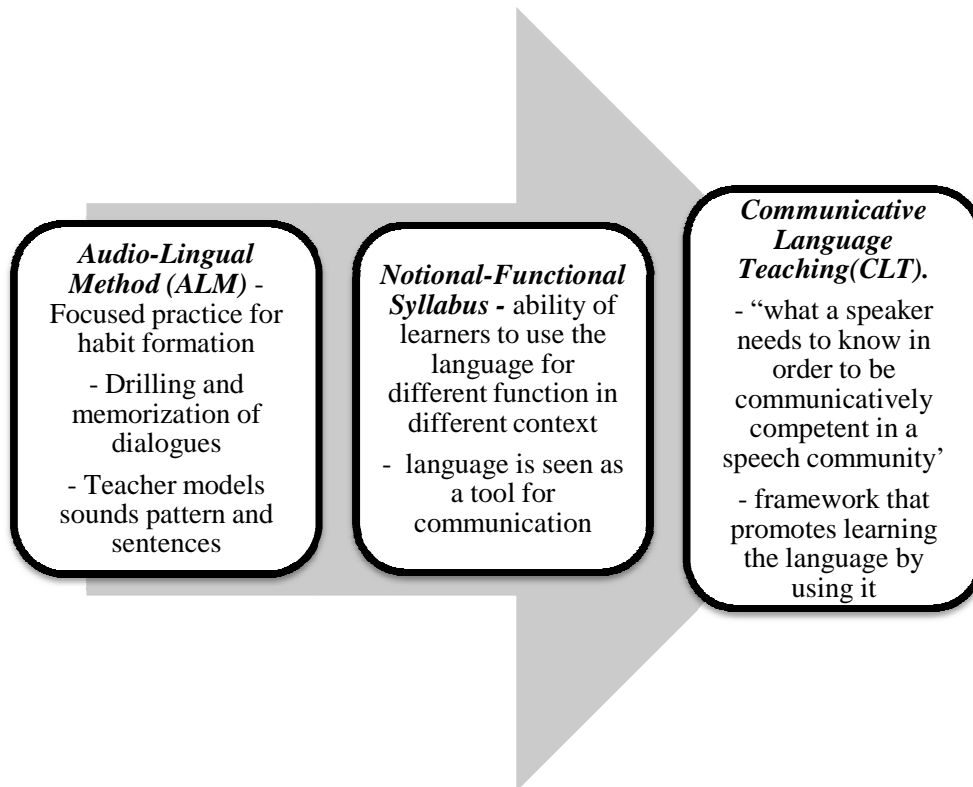
Thus, the implementation of CLT in primary schools in Malaysia needs to be revisited and re-examined again with careful and in-depth research. Proper support should be given to the teachers to facilitate the teaching of English using CLT as they are the main agent of change from traditional method to communicative approach of teaching English (Marylessor, 2012). Since teachers are the key players in the classroom and implementers of this curriculum change, it is vital to explore the teachers' perspectives of the curriculum reform in Malaysia. This study hopes to investigate the teachers' perception on the implementation of CLT in primary school classrooms in Malaysia, discover the challenges the teachers face implementing CLT in their classrooms and also the expectations of the teachers on implementing CLT in the classroom.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT was introduced based on the need to focus on language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures in the Audiolingual method (Richard & Rodgers, 2014). Its focus has been on the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learner participation in communicative event (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Figure 1 below presents the transformation from audio-lingual method to CLT.

Figure 1

The Development of Communicative Language teaching (Brown, 2005)



Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been defined in various versions since it was introduced in 1971. Badilla and Chacon (2013) defined CLT based on its goal which is to promote communicative competence in second and foreign language teaching. Taha and Salamah (2016) then define CLT based on their concern towards ESL learners which then described as an effective approach in developing fluent, proficient and accurate competency and ability in the target language. Brown (2007) discusses CLT in his book through the perception of its procedures that offers fundamental communicative properties of language translated through authentic, real-world and meaningful classroom activities.

Besides, Assefa (2002) defined CLT based on the shift of traditional teaching to the communicative teaching and described it as an approach that emphasizes communication of meaning over the practice and manipulation of grammatical forms. Richards and Rodgers (2014) describe CLT based on both American and British views that emphasize its aim to (a) make communicative competence the goal of teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

All the definitions provided above share two main cores which are; (i) to introduce communicative language teaching and (ii) to produce communicative language learners. Hence, CLT may be defined in various ways and perspectives as long as it serves its purpose to promote the communicative teaching of language and produce accurate, proficient and fluent language user. Celce-Murcia (2001) state CLT remains the main choice for the current period of teaching and learning English as the second language.

The Framework of CLT

CLT was introduced based on three major theories of language which are Linguistic Theory by Chomsky (1996), Communicative Competence by Hymes (1972) and Functions of Language by Halliday (1975). All of these theories are interconnected with each other in explaining the foundation and process of developing CLT approach. Hymes (1972, 1967) introduced communicative competence (CC) based on critics of the notion of competence by Chomsky (1965) which is considered as too limited (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Chomsky (1996) was concerned with the ability of learners to produce grammatically correct sentences. The structural method introduced by Chomsky was considered as insufficient to Hymes in developing learners' language potential as a whole. It was based on the concern that Chomsky's theory has neglected the importance of speech act or the ability of learners to use the language for speaking purposes.

Hymes then relate his theory with Halliday's Seven Function of Language theory. Hymes' communicative competence may be seen as the equivalent to Halliday's meaning of potential (Celce-Murcia,2001). Halliday (1975) in Brown (2007) presents seven basic functions that language performs which are instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative and representational. Brown (2007) stated that these seven different functions of language are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive but incorporated in many different functions simultaneously in discourse. Similarly, Hymes view of language corresponds with Halliday's in term of the ability of learners to use the language for different functions in different context of discourse.

Based on this ground, Hymes introduced Communicative Competence theory which then translated into CLT approach. Hymes described learners who acquire communicative competence will be able to acquire knowledge and ability to use the language for different communicative context. CLT approach integrated all skills depending on the context of discourse. This reflects the authentic use of language where each skill is related to each other rather than being taught in isolation. CLT also highlights the importance of learners' role as active participants of learning whereas teachers' act as facilitators throughout the process.

CLT presents language instructors with the principle of authentic language teaching that must be translated into their teaching practices. CLT was introduced to provide learners with an authentic language learning framework that promotes learning the language by using it in many different contexts.

Communicative Competence

Communicative Competence has been defined by many prominent researcher and writer based on their own perspectives and concern. In defining Communicative Competence, three prominent sources in the field of English language teaching (ELT) were chosen in an attempt to explain this term.

Referring to a research conducted by Paulston (1974) in Brown (2007) describes communicative competence in comparison to linguistic competence as the difference between knowledge that enables a person to communicate functionally and interactively and knowledge

“about” language forms. Secondly, referring to Celce-Murcia (2001) describes communicative competence as “the use of language in social context” and “language as social behaviour”. The third definition of communicative competence comes from Richards and Rodgers (2014), which they refer as “a means of getting things accomplished in an appropriate manner”. Communicative competence has been defined in various and broad tenet. Based on the definition provided above, we may conclude communicative competence as the ability of learners to use the language for communication purposes in a meaningful situation.

In later years, Canale and Swain (1980) narrowed down the definition of Communicative Competence into four subcategories which are; (i) grammatical competence, (ii) discourse competence, (iii) sociolinguistic competence and (iv) strategic competence. This definition draws a significant point that communicative competence does not only focus on oral fluency but also concern on grammar accuracy and proficiency of language use as stated in the first component which is grammatical competence. This shows that the true application of CLT in language teaching must cater towards the construction of both fluency and accuracy of language use. Communicative competence does not only focus on speaking skill but also concerns with listening, reading and writing skill. Each of the skill is seen as complementing each other in order for meaningful communication to take place. Later in 1983, Savignon introduced an ‘inverted pyramid’ of classroom model as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
‘Inverted Pyramid’ of Classroom Model

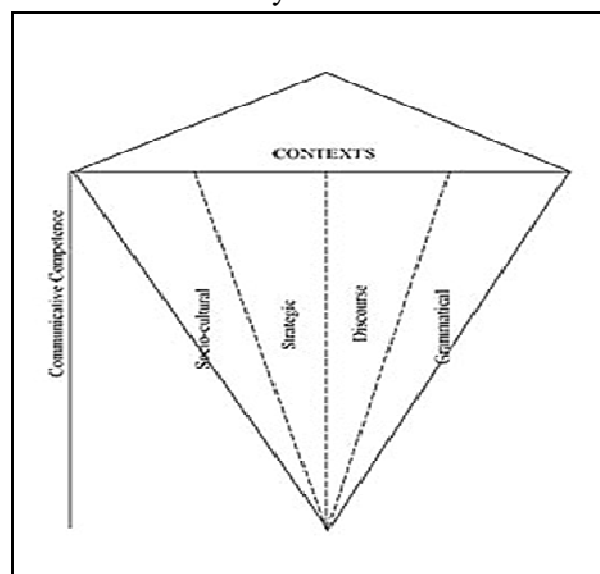


Figure 2 shows the ‘inverted pyramid’ of classroom model by Savignon (1983). This pyramid describes that continuous practice and experience of communicative activities enables learners to gradually develop their communicative competence. The communicative competence comprises of grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and socio-cultural competence.

Hence, CLT was introduced to make communicative competence as the goal of language teaching. CLT approach develops learners' ability through activities that require learner to communicate in the target language. CLT activities such as role-play reflect the real-life situation that provides learners with opportunities to use the language in different context. Savignon (1972) in Celce-Murcia (2001), used the term "communicative competence" to describe the ability of language learner to interact with other speakers and to make meaning. As describe by Hymes (1971), CLT is focusing not on learning the language but to perform language function as social behaviour.

CLT activities and classroom practices

CLT is a well-known approach that emphasizes on learning the language through the practice of oral communication over memorization of rules. This process requires the learner to learn the actual use of language in a meaningful way focusing on developing both fluency and accuracy. CLT offers wide range of interactive activities that support the development of communicative competence as mention before. However, it is also common that, teachers are unable to comprehend the true concept of CLT procedure. Lessons normally started with action-based classroom activities such as songs and games followed by the teacher-fronted talk and by individual seat work based on tasks taken from the chalkboard or textbook (Hardman, J., and A-Rahman, N., 2014). It may seem that the teachers are conducting communicative activities but by the end of the lesson, teacher resorts to the passive production of output which is irrelevant to the communicative use of language.

In contrast, Richards and Rodgers (2014), listed out the principles of learning and teaching using CLT as follows;

- i) Make real communication the focus of language learning
- ii) Provide opportunities for learners to experiments
- iii) Be tolerant of errors as they indicate the process of building learners' communicative competence
- iv) Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency
- v) Link different skills such as speaking, reading and listening together to reflect real-world
- vi) Let learners discover grammar rules

Based on the principles presented above, CLT activities must follow certain criteria. The teacher must be well versed in planning and conducting lesson according to learners' level, age and interest. Applying CLT does not mean that teachers are restricted to a certain framework and burden with a heavy workload. However, CLT offers a variety of language activities and help the teacher to plan lessons beforehand. Nishino (2008) suggested a few activities aimed to develop communicative competence like role play, interviews, information gap, games, language exchanges, surveys, pair work and learning by teaching. These activities have created a new image of the classroom where learners are no longer seated and passively copying notes and solving problems on sheets of papers. They are also able to interact with each other using the target language in an appropriate and meaningful way.

The role of the teachers and learners in CLT

The introduction of CLT has brought a great change in the role of teacher and learner. In CLT, learners are expected to play an active role and to be responsible for their own learning progress. Nevertheless, this does not limit teacher's task to a minimum level. Vongxay, (2013) stated that English teachers are often criticized over the failure of communicative teaching. Hence, there should be a clear distinction of teachers' role to ensure the effectiveness of their teaching.

Teachers are bound to be the facilitator of students' learning process and progress. Richards and Rodgers (2014), describe teachers as need analyst, counsellor and group process manager. Rather than just observing the lesson, teachers' responsibilities are more towards planner before the lesson, observer as it progresses and evaluator of learners' achievement to guide them for the next phase. CLT does not lessen nor increase teacher's workload but rather help the teacher to act proactively throughout the lesson. The teacher is the knowledge holder who assists the learners when needed or when they are misdirected. As stated before, errors prove that learning is taking place. As the teacher monitors the class, the teacher would only interfere when they found that the learners are having difficulties and need support.

Assefa (2002) suggested that through communicative and cooperative learning learners work in pairs or groups. This according to Vongxay (2013) is when students are in difficulty or in doubt, they do not immediately ask the teacher for help or advice, but only after they have tried to solve the problem among themselves with an emphasis on working together in pairs, groups and as a whole class. Learners interact with each other through meaningful activities to convey and negotiate meaning as language is a means of communication.

CLT reflects a more social relationship between the teacher and learner (Vongxay, 2013). Breen and Candlin (1980: 90) in Richards and Rodgers (2014), describe teacher as the mediator between learner and learner, learner and resources and become the resources himself. The teacher acts as independent participants who provide support only when needed to avoid reliance of learners. As discussed above, teacher and learners complement each other throughout the learning process. The success of communicative learning depends on the relation among learners and also the relation of learners with the teachers.

The teachers' perceptions of CLT

Teachers' perceptions are crucial in ensuring the success of CLT approach in teaching and learning the target language. Teachers are more motivated and interested to use the approach if they perceive it in a positive way. Based on a survey conducted by Hu (2005) in Beaumont and Chang (2011) with 400 teachers, it is found that CLT practice is almost absent and rather dominated by traditional teaching practice. He believes that the long employed traditional approach has a superior status as it was greatly favoured by teachers thus resulting in the rejection of CLT.

In relation to this, Beaumont and Chang (2011) conducted a study to explore the practical constraints and socio-cultural constraints faced by the teachers. The study found that teachers have positive perceptions of CLT and clear understanding of the implementation between

traditional and communicative teaching. Hardman and A-Rahman (2014) conducted a study to explore whether the teachers' practice in teaching English reflect the principles of CLT and is in line with the goal of the curriculum change. It was found that teachers were unaware of the theoretical principle of CLT which leads to misconduct of teaching practices. Teachers were also having difficulties in identifying the correct way of implementing CLT. Hence, teachers tend to decline the use of CLT to teach English and return to the traditional way of teaching by using drilling and memorization activities. There were activities conducted such as the use of songs, games and dialogue which resorts to memorization of sentences and chanting the lines. These activities contradict with the principles of CLT where students must be able to use the language in an authentic context that promotes interaction. The communication purposes were not achieved and students were unable to develop their communicative competency.

Kim (2014) examines the interrelated relation between teachers' belief of CLT and its effect on classroom practices in teaching English. English teachers are often criticized for the unsuccessful teaching of communicative English (Vongxay, 2013). The result categorized teachers into two groups which are teachers who follow CLT principle throughout lesson and teachers who apply CLT only when applicable. Teachers who favour CLT are most likely to apply this approach in their teaching. However, they were also concern about the time constrains to apply CLT and learners' motivations in learning English.

Challenges implementing CLT in the Classroom

Despite of the advantages offered by CLT, there are also challenges and difficulties faced by teachers in implementing CLT. The challenges must be addressed in order to find possible solutions and further enhance teachers' role as well as to develop learners' communicative competence. Teachers' acceptances of CLT approach play an important factor in ensuring the success of CLT. This is supported by Al-Magid and Al-Mamun (2009) when they state that the teacher's attitude must be considered as a critical factor in implementing CLT as it is related to other variables that contribute to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Teachers are the planner and facilitator of who acts before, while and after the CLT implementation. Consequently, positive attitude portrays by the teachers in implementing CLT affect student motivation and interest to learn English for communicative purposes.

Li (1998) in Ozsevik (2010) discuss this in a broader tenet which encompasses four categories of difficulties.

1. Difficulties caused by teachers:
 - Deficiency in spoken English
 - Deficiency in strategic and sociolinguistic competence,
 - Lack of training in CLT,
 - Few opportunities for retraining in CLT,
 - Misconceptions about CLT,
 - Little time for and expertise in material development
2. Difficulties caused by students:
 - Low English proficiency,
 - Little motivation for communicative competence,

- Resistance to class participation
3. Difficulties caused by the educational system:
 - Large classes,
 - Grammar-based examinations,
 - Insufficient funding,
 - Lack of support
 4. Difficulties caused by CLT itself:
 - CLT's inadequate account of EFL teaching,
 - Lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments.

The comparison of CLT status over the traditional method of teaching is also much debated since it was introduced. Teachers are still arguing about the relevancy and successability of CLT over traditional teaching. As found by Yu (2001), many Chinese foreign language teachers are being pessimist about the status of CLT compared to the traditional analytical approach. Teachers are concern over examination results which assess only reading and writing skill and disregard speaking and listening skill.

In Malaysia, it was found that teachers discussed how the assessments tested pupils on discrete items, notably writing, reading and grammar exercises (Hardman, and A-Rahman, 2014). Students should be given assessment of communicative skill that connects speaking and listening skill together with reading and writing skill to develop learners' competence as a whole. By the end of the schooling, learners will be able to use English language not only for academic purposes but able to communicate using the language in their daily life.

Apart from that, teachers are also anxious from lack of support provided by upper management. All eight teachers also expressed the view that there was not enough support provided to aid the implementation of the communicative approach and that there was a mismatch between the curriculums and how it was assessed (Hardman, and A-Rahman, 2014). This lead to unqualified teacher with lack of understanding of CLT and passive learner as well insufficient facilities and technology provided.

Relevant support for the implementation of CLT in the classroom

CLT offers great opportunity for teachers to teach English for meaningful communication. This approach also reflects the globalisation needs of learners who should be able to be functional in English. However, the results of CLT teaching are not as expected. As stated by Karim (2004) the limitations are (a) lack of administrative support, (b) lack of resources, (c) lack of sufficient English language knowledge, (d) wider curriculum, (e) large class size, (f) discrepancy/inconsistency between CLT syllabus and nationally administered exams, (g) teachers' holding on to traditional methods, and (h) lack of authentic learning materials.

Teachers were rather enthusiastic towards the application of CLT in their classroom but were also anxious towards certain difficulties related to lack of teaching materials, form-focused exam and inadequate teacher training. The implementation of CLT has become a great challenge

for the teachers. There are several factors that contribute to this hindrance. Hence, Karim (2004) further explains that teacher should be given proper support in the following areas: (a) teacher training, (b) vocabulary and grammar teaching, (c) materials and resources, and (d) assessment / evaluation.

Ozsevik (2010) based on his study in Turkey found that teachers are facing difficulties in using CLT approach due to lack of training in implementing CLT. Thus, teachers are often found to misunderstand the principles of CLT teaching resulting in teaching that does not reflect CLT. Teachers were not given proper material and sources to implement CLT. The increasing enrolment of student also causes teachers to teach in large classes with insufficient funding. Hence, teacher claims that they were unable to prepare the materials needed apart from lack of time to do so. Ozsevik (2010) listed out several components to improve CLT implementation. The components are training in CLT, administrative support, financial support to obtain extra resources and materials for communicative activities, authentic materials.

Chang (2009) in his study conducted interview session with Taiwanese teachers. He reported that teacher articulates the need for adequate teacher training, sufficient CLT teaching resources, school support and modified exams. Teachers are also driven towards exam-oriented teaching. This has caused them to choose structural approach rather than communicative approach. CLT also lack of assessment that reflect learners' language ability as a whole. Teachers' are expected to implement CLT without proper support and training.

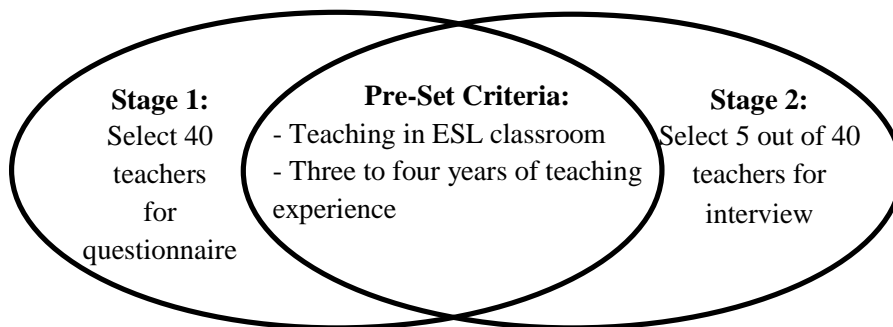
As state by Richard & Rodgers (2004) CLT has been introduced in Malaysia since 1980 with new textbook and curriculum. Yet, Malaysia is still facing secondary students who struggle in speaking skill (Mardziah, 2014), tertiary students who unable to perform in speaking (Marlini, 2014), and the shortage of English proficient industrial workers (Sarudin, 2013). The implementation of CLT in primary school in Malaysia needs to be revisited and re-examine again with careful and in-depth research. Proper support should be given to the primary teachers to facilitate the teaching of English using CLT. Marylessor (2012) views teacher as the main agent of change from traditional method to communicative approach of teaching English. Hence, this study will be exploring primary school teachers' opinion regarding the supports needed to facilitate the teaching and learning of English.

Methodology

The study will employ a descriptive qualitative research design. It is a comprehensive summarization, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). In this study, a comprehensive account of the teachers' perceptions, challenges and expectations will be explored and discussed descriptively. The participants will be 40 teachers chosen from the national primary schools (Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan) within Kota Tinggi district in Johor. The participants will be chosen based on random purposeful sampling method as shown in Figure 3. It is the process of identifying a population of interest and developing a systematic way of selecting cases that is not based on advanced knowledge of how the outcomes would appear but mainly to increase credibility of findings (Cohen, 2006). The participants will be randomly selected based on the following pre-set criteria;

- i. primary school teachers who are currently teaching in ESL classroom teaching English subject
- ii. teachers with three to four years of teaching experience (competent teacher)

Figure 3
Sampling Procedure of Participants



This study will utilise questionnaire and semi-structured interview as the instruments to collect data. The questionnaire will be adopted and adapted from Karavas-Doukas (1996) on Attitudes toward Communicative Approach Scale (ATCAS) will be used to collect data related to teachers' perceptions on CLT. This instrument has also been utilised by Jafari, Shokrpour and Guetterman (2015) and Ozsevik (2010) in their studies investigating Teachers' Perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching in Iranian High Schools. The semi-structured interview questions will be adapted from Vongxay (2013) which will support data collected from the questionnaire with in-depth exploration of teachers' opinions, related to challenges and expected support in implementing CLT. This will help the researcher to ensure the interconnectedness of data collected from questionnaire and interview session. This is to ensure the credibility in reporting the findings of study.

To ensure the feasibility and practicality of research instruments in collecting data, a pilot test will be conducted before the actual data collection phase takes place. This is to enable the researcher make necessary adjustment and changes in the research instruments. The pilot test will take approximately two weeks consisting of the distribution and recollection of questionnaire with five participants who met the prerequisite criteria as the actual participants in the main research. Two participants will be directly chosen for the interview sessions which follow the same procedure in the main research.

This study will be conducted in a fixed procedure comprising two phases of data collection:

- i. Phase 1 : Distribution and Recollection of Questionnaire
The research will begin with the distribution and recollection of questionnaire to the selected participants. Participants will be given a week to answer the questionnaire.
- ii. Phase 2 : Interview Session

The interview session will be conducted with consent from participants and will be audiotaped

The data obtain from the questionnaire will be analysed using percentages and presented in tables and charts. This form of data analysis has been employed by several researchers (Ahmad and Rao, 2013; Chelbi, 2011; Khadidja, 2010). Data collected from the interview sessions will be (1) transcribed (2) analyzed, (3) coded, and (4) explain descriptively, and (5) justified (Creswell 2009). The data will be coded into two main themes which are challenges faced by the teachers in teaching using CLT and expected support needed by the teachers to apply CLT in classroom.

This study concerns with the pedagogical aspect of the CLT approach in the classroom. Thus, the focus of the study will be on the teachers only. The data will be collected only from school teachers within the Kota Tinggi district investigating their perceptions, challenges and expectations implementing CLT in the classrooms. Therefore, the findings of the study should not be treated as reflecting the perceptions, challenges and expectations by all English language teachers in Malaysia.

The findings of the study would yield to three contributions. Firstly, the findings will provide insights about the teachers' perceptions, challenges and expectations in the implementation of CLT approach in the classroom. Secondly, the findings of the study will add to the existing body of knowledge about English language teaching in Malaysia, particularly in primary schools. Thirdly, the teachers who participate in this study will have a valuable experience for self-reflection on the pedagogical approach in the classroom. This in turn will provide insights for them to see their strengths and weaknesses in their approach, thus enables them to improve the classroom practices.

Conclusion

This study will be conducted based on the concern to seek teachers' perceptions in using CLT to teach English Language, investigate the challenges faced as well as to explore possible support needed by the teachers in teaching using CLT. It is hoped that this research will help participants to discover their own understanding and perception towards CLT. Based on the questionnaire and interview answered, the teacher will be able to explore whether their understanding and practice reflects the principles underpinning CLT. Hence, this research will help teachers to revise and improve their understanding of CLT implementation in teaching speaking.

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