

# **Bridging the Gap between CLT and CBI Theories and Practices in Thai Small Rural Schools**

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## **Abstract**

Learning reform has been proposed in Thailand as it is clearly specified in the basic curriculum that the learning and teaching EFL shall be based on communicative and content-based approaches. This paper reports the issues which face EFL teachers and a trainer in attempting to introduce and implement CLT and CBI in small rural schools in which the teachers have only a basic level of fluency in English. Participant feedback during training is presented. The results of classroom observation are also reported. It is further suggested that there is a need for support both in knowledge of English language knowledge and pedagogical knowledge.

## **Introduction**

Academic knowledge and rapid technical advancement during the era of globalization has caused tremendous changes in the national and international social and economical spheres. In order to ensure the relevancy

between basic education and changes in the fields of economy, society and knowledge advancement, leading to formulation of new strategies in education quality development to accelerate and fulfill the needs of Thai individuals and society, learner competitive capacity and creative

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co-operation with the world society, the Ministry of Education, thus, formulated the Basic Curriculum B.E. 2544 (A.D. 2001). It consists of eight subject groups namely Thai language, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Religion and Culture, Health and Physical Education, Art Career and Technology, and Foreign Language (Ministry of Education, 2001).

In the foreign language group, English is compulsory for all grade levels. Other

foreign languages are selective, as appropriate. The foreign language consists of four substances including language for communication, language and culture, language and other subject group relationship and language and community and world relationship.

The overall objects of foreign languages (mainly English) are "to develop students' basic practical communication abilities, depending the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages". In consideration of these overall objectives for foreign languages, there are several issues that the Ministry of Education points out to improve English Education and English teachers. Administrators, teachers, and teacher-educators in Thailand need to approach English language teaching from a different perspective that incorporates more opportunities for authentic language use during communicative, goal-oriented

activities in smaller classrooms. In addition, Basic Education Curriculum, Foreign Language Group, Substance 3 calls for students to utilize foreign languages for studying

other subjects; own self developing and broadening the world view on language bases. Bilingual programs are also conducted at the levels of primary and secondary/diploma in schools. Thus Thai EFL teachers have to employ teaching methods such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and content-based instruction (CBI). Ministry of Education is responsible for introducing these teaching methods to teachers by offering short and long term training programs to help Thai EFL teachers to be aware of purposes of English teaching. Training is supported by the formation of a national institute working in partnership with regional universities. The development of small rural schools has been a key policy tool in improving quality across the country.

Faculty of Education Mahasarakham University is one of institute that has been working in collaboration with educational service areas in the northeastern part of Thailand to develop teacher professions. The researcher who has been teaching in this faculty for twelve years and also been involved in training EFL teachers realizes that taking into account all the provisions indicated in the new curriculum, EFL teachers are facing a great challenge-turning theory into practice. And the researcher believes that CLT and CBI approaches provide excellent means by which to cover such a wide spectrum of requirements deriving from the new curriculum.

### CLT

Understanding of CLT was a concurrent development on both sides of the Atlantic. In



Europe, during the 1970s, the language needs of a rapidly increasing number of immigrants and guest workers, and a rich British linguistic tradition, that included social as well as linguistic descriptions of language behavior, led the Council of Europe to develop a syllabus for learners based on function-notional concepts of language use. Meanwhile Savignon (1991) reminds us that in 1970 in the United States, Hymes reacted to Chomsky's characterization of the linguistic competence of the ideal native speaker and proposed the term "communicative competence" to represent the use of language in social context, the observance of sociolinguistic norms of appropriacy. CLT is an approach which brings linguistic knowledge, language skills and communicative abilities into association with one another (Canale & Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1978). Canale and Swain (1980) and Savignon (1982) identified the four dimensions of communicative competence namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. CLT has had an influence in both second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) teaching since the early 1970's. (Littlewood, 1981).

### **CBI**

Content-based instruction (CBI) is a teaching method that emphasizes learning about something rather than learning about language. Although content-based instruction is not new, there has been an increased interest in it over the last ten years, particularly in the USA and Canada where it has proven very

effective in ESL immersion programs. This interest has now spread to EFL classrooms around the world where teachers are discovering that their students like content-based instruction and are excited to learn English this way. Content-based instruction lends itself to the incorporation of group work, particularly cooperative learning, which is an effective way of teaching content and language (Davies, 2003, Introduction section, para. 1). One of the more noticeable current trends is the innovative ways in which teachers have incorporated communicative teaching practices into content-based instruction. Stoller (1997), for instance, describes how she integrated project work into content-based instruction and Short (1997) reports on the use of graphic organizers to teach social studies. Theme-based model is one of content-based instruction models and usually found in EFL contexts. This model can be taught by an EFL teacher or team taught with a content specialist. The teacher(s) can create a course of study designed to unlock and build on their own students' interests and the content can be chosen from an enormous number of diverse topics (Davies, 2003, Types of Content-based Instruction, para. 4). Theme-based model is language-driven: the goal of this model is to help students develop L2 skills and proficiency. Themes are selected based on their potential to contribute to the learner's language growth in specific topical or functional domains. Theme-based courses are taught by language instructors to L2 learners who are evaluated in terms of their language



growth. Students (and their teachers) are not necessarily accountable for content mastery. Indeed, content learning is incidental (Met,1999).

### **CLT in Thai Context**

CLT was introduced to secondary school teachers by the Ministry of Education in 1984, initially eight ERICs were set up in 1984 to provide focal points for the training of EFL teachers. Originally established as the Key Personnel Project to train upcountry secondary school teachers of English, it developed into PISSET (a neat bilingual acronym for Project for Improving Secondary English Teachers). Both aimed to help selected teachers become trainers of other EFL teachers in their region. Now every province and in Thailand has at least one ERIC. The project has been receiving valuable long-term support from the British Council, but again, the sheer quantity of training required needs a very large budget. The Ministry of Education tries to provide money to support the training, nearly one hundred training workshops, each involving around 50 participants. (Watson Todd, The ERIC Model, para 5).

Thailand has, over many years, embraced the CLT and it is today official government policy. There is clear evidence that such trends are by no means unique to Thailand, they have, for example, been reported in Korea and in China and are without doubt taking place throughout the whole of the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The driving force for change seems to be based on the notion that

traditional methods have failed and are wrong, whereas the CLT will succeed and is right (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004, Background, para 3 ). However, Bilash & Kwangsawad ( 2004) conducted action research in Thai classrooms and recruited four participant teachers. They found that to help EFL teachers successful adopt CLT in their classrooms teachers must understand CLT; require a number of key supports in order to succeed at implementing communicative activities in their classrooms; and require time to prepare materials for interactive activities.

### **CBI in Thai Context**

In 1998 the Department of Curriculum Development in Thailand's Ministry of Education worked with the USIS office in Bangkok to co-sponsor a visit by Donna Brinton, American specialist in content-based instruction. Because the department considered the topic vital for the nation's school system, it supported a series of workshops by Brinton throughout the country (USIA, 2006, para 21). Moreover, English Teaching Fellow (ETF) Cristina Schoonmaker worked with the Ministry of Education of Thailand to introduce English as a required subject at grade one and to switch from grammar-based learning to a communicative method of teaching English at the primary and secondary school levels. Schoonmaker developed new English language teaching manuals for the primary and secondary school levels, incorporating content-based instruction, "CBI," a method which integrates academic content with language-



teaching objectives. Schoonmaker also conducted workshops for teachers all over Thailand, introduced CBI at the ThaiTESOL convention (USIA, 2006, para 21).

In 2003 the Ministry of Education set up the policy that teaching and learning in English is an optional education. Schools and institutes can manage teaching and learning in English called " English Program" : EP. Pre-primary level provides teaching and learning in English not more than 50% of the time. Primary level provides teaching and learning in English only English, Mathematics, Science and Physical Education. And secondary level provides teaching and learning in English all subjects except Thai and Social Science in a part of Thai law, culture and tradition.

Moreover, Greenleaf (2004, Project Highlight, para. 1) has done workshops on content- based instruction and student centered learning for elementary aged learners in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chiang Rai, Thailand. She delivered 9 seminars and workshops to over 400 participants. The workshops were designed with an interactive task-based approach in which the educators participated in actual content- based activities.

### **Training program**

The training program was divided into two phases. The first phase consisted of 6 training courses held at Faculty of Education Maharakham University from April to May 2006. All training courses were 3 days in length, with 8 hours training each day. The second phase was classroom observation. The

first step of the training course was introducing CLT and CBI theories then a lesson plan was developed to demonstrate less teacher-centred ways with participants becoming 'students' during the demonstrations. This approach aimed to expose participants to CLT and CBI where examples of activities related to textbook materials are: topic/text-related task interaction in pairs/groups; and pair/group collaborative task completion. Following each demonstration, an opportunity was provided for participants to reflect, and give and receive feedback on what they had just experienced with regard to the how and why of the teaching procedure. Having experienced the lesson plan demonstration, and reflected on teaching procedures, participants are in a much more knowledgeable and confident position from which to then work in groups to prepare their own lesson plans (with the support of the trainer) by applying procedures previously demonstrated to their chosen textbook materials. Then, each group practiced the lesson plan to members from different groups. Following each practice, an opportunity was provided for other groups to comment. Thus, the main objectives of this program were to introduce the notion of CLT and CBI; demonstrate and practice classroom activities and techniques; encourage reflective teaching practice; and enable participants to share ideas and experiences with their peers. In line with these objectives, the following 3-day schedule was devised with morning sessions lasting 4 hours and afternoon sessions being 4 hours in duration:



Table 1: Training Program

Days	Sessions
Day 1	
8.00-12.00 (trainer)	Introducing CLT, CLT lesson planning and demonstrating
13.00-17.00	Developing CLT lesson plans (participants)
Day 2	
8.00-12.00	Practicing CLT(participants)
13.00-17.00 (trainer)	Introducing CBI, CBI lesson planning and demonstrating
Day 3	
8.00-12.00	Developing CBI lesson plans (participants)
13.00-17.00	Practicing CBI (participants)

### Participants

173 EFL teachers from small rural schools throughout northeastern part of Thailand (19 provinces) attended the training course. Of the 173 teachers, 40 were male and 133 were female whose teaching experience ranged from 3 months to 22 years. Only 90 teachers majored in English. Almost all had minimal English proficiency, particularly in listening and speaking skills. Only 23 teachers received CLT training. All participants had not been provided with training on CBI. Each training course was conducted in Thai and English by the researcher.

### Training Course Evaluation

Feedback to determine the degree of satisfaction with the training course was gathered from the 173 participants using questionnaire administered at the end of the 3th day of each course. The questionnaire contained questions related to each session's contents, trainer and materials, and participants provided a rating by selecting from a four-point Likert-type scale. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to answer a short questionnaire with open questions concerning general comments regarding the training in order to discover any broader aspects of note. Followings are feedback results.



Table 2

<i>Contents</i>	% Poor	% Satisfactory	% Good	% Very good
<b>Day 1</b>				
Introducing CLT, CLT lesson planning and demonstrating	-	4.24	83.40	12.36
Developing CLT lesson plans	-	2.48	83.80	13.72
<b>Day 2</b>				
Practicing CLT	-	2.20	86.80	11.00
Introducing CBI, CBI lesson planning and demonstrating	-	2.00	86.60	11.40
<b>Day 3</b>				
Developing CBI lesson plans	-	2.60	77.40	20.00
Practicing CBI	-	1.20	84.70	14.10

Table 3

<i>Materials</i>	% Poor	% Satisfactory	% Good	% Very good
<b>Day 1</b>				
Introducing CLT, CLT lesson planning and demonstrating	-	1.80	89.60	8.60
Developing CLT lesson plans	-	0.55	88.40	11.05
<b>Day 2</b>				
Practicing CLT	-	0.29	85.60	14.11
Introducing CBI, CBI lesson planning and demonstrating	-	0.49	86.70	12.81
<b>Day 3</b>				
Developing CBI lesson plans	-	1.21	89.79	9.00
Practicing CBI	-	0.73	87.98	11.29



Table 4

<i>Trainer</i>	% Poor	% Satisfactory	% Good	% Very good
<b>Day 1</b>				
Introducing CLT, CLT lesson planning and demonstrating	-	0.50	6.70	92.80
Developing CLT lesson plans	-	0.20	8.20	91.60
<b>Day 2</b>				
Practicing CLT	-	0.09	8.71	91.20
Introducing CBI, CBI lesson planning and demonstrating	-	0.98	11.02	88.00
<b>Day 3</b>				
Developing CBI lesson plans	-	0.05	9.15	90.80
Practicing CBI	-	-	12.48	87.52

### General feedback

1. What do you think about the organization of the program?

Summary: The organization has been evaluated as good by all participants; some mentioned that the schedule was too tight for debates and discussion during developing lesson plan session. The most important thing was that the program allowed them to have a chance to practice.

2. Are you taking with you any good ideas for further teaching/learning practice? If the answer is yes: which ones?

Summary: Concerning the good ideas for further teaching/learning practice some quotations have been: "Teachers should prepare their own lesson plans." Teachers no longer have to focus on grammar and translation skills, but they need to provide useful activities for students to communicate in En-

glish and to be able to use English for studying other subjects".

3. What is the most important you have learned/experienced during the program?

Summary: All participants agreed that they have learned a lot about preparing lesson plans based on Basic Curriculum B.E. 2544 (A.D. 2001).

4. What did you like most during the program?

Summary: All participants mentioned that they like the trainer who was a good speaker, intelligent, engaging and enjoyable. Some quotations have been: "The trainer is extremely knowledgeable in the subject matter ... very good instructor.

5. What did you dislike most during the program?

Summary: All participants were not satisfied with the time. They struggled to compre-





hend the techniques introduced over the three days, and wanted more time to be spent on each session to consolidate understanding and practicing.

### **Classroom Observation**

Three months after attending the training course 19 participants from 19 provinces were observed their teaching by the researcher. The interview was also conducted at the end of each classroom observation. Followings are the results of classroom observation.

### **Workload**

Of the 19 EFL teachers, 16 taught 28 hours a week only 3 taught 20-25 hours. These teachers were also responsible for academic affairs, budget and personnel, student affair and service affairs. Heavy workload of teachers prevents them from devoting much time to class preparation and sharing of ideas with other teachers.

### **Use L1**

Both CLT and CBI classes were typified by an almost exclusive dependence on L1. The teachers did not use L2 because they were afraid of making mistake. They believed that if the teacher is going to use English, it must be perfect. Only one of 10 teachers used L2 in the classroom. However, it seemed that the students in her class were unfamiliar with L2, and possibly had not used it in class before.

### **Traditional Teaching Method**

Both CLT and CBI classes were lack of student-to-student interaction, and no movement out of desks or pair work during the entire classes. Only one had the students to listen to native speakers from tape recording. However, the set-up of the cassette player was so slow that the preparation to listen took up time that students needed for practice. It seemed that he/she was unfamiliar with the equipment, and possibly had not used it in class before. One teacher attended a number of teacher training workshops and had considerable knowledge about task-oriented teaching. He/She used an information-gap activity which encouraged students to produce language more freely by introducing a task that had students moving round the classroom in a lockstep manner and interacting fully in a variety of pairs to find out information about their partners. Students were evidently unaccustomed to the task. Seven teachers did not give opportunity for student speaking time or practice. There were short periods when students could turn to the nearest partners and read a dialogue, but still these were not monitored and there were no feedback. These teachers continued to rely on L1 for all interaction and instructions.

Ten teachers used textbooks and began with a mixture of Thai explanations with English phrases occasionally embedded. After some drilling of sentence patterns, students were given the chance to practice their dialogues with a partner in their seated rows, though there was no movement around the



class. However, the student attitude to simply reading dialogues aloud was, in the circumstances of not being engaged in the subject matter, understandably unenthusiastic: they used no inflection, no stress timing, no catenation, and mouthed words parrot-fashion. There was no correction or modeling, just a focus on the form without an emphasis on a living language as a tool of conveying meanings. Yet it lacked modeling or demonstration with students, was totally teacher-led and -controlled, and gave the students no chance for production. However, these teachers did very well during presentation/drilling stage. They also used pictures to assist and stimulate comprehension.

### **CLT Classes**

All teachers were already familiar with the PPP approach, which allows teachers to present language (a grammar point), practice it in a controlled sense and then produce it in a free context. While observing teachers' classrooms, the researcher noticed that the teachers did not allow much time for the students to practice the information presented. Interaction was teacher-dominated, and students were called upon primarily to provide brief, factual responses. All of the teachers agreed that PPP was a user - friendly approach for their classrooms because it allowed them to continue to play the more "traditional" role of teacher (e.g., during presentation) while at the same time learning to be facilitators (e.g., during practice and production). The researcher observed that the teachers did very well dur-

ing presentation phase - a traditional role of teachers. However, they needed to learn to become facilitators. They were unclear how to design activities during practice and production. In addition, the teachers encountered difficulties in selecting texts, materials and activities that would match the units.

### **CBI Classes**

All teachers had difficulty finding reading passages and listening texts related to the units that teachers asked the students to select before preparing activities and materials. They also had a problem with designing activities and selecting contents that were relevant to the four language skills. Only two teachers were able to design four skill activities and had incorporated small group and pair activities along with whole class discussions and individual work and designed lessons that allowed more time for students to practice their four language skills and contents. From interview with the teachers, the researcher found that they had difficulty grasping concepts and relating aspects of the training to their particular classrooms and learners. One reason for this may be that all of the teachers were not familiar with CBI. They had not received CBI training before. As a result, reflecting on procedures and techniques in activities and linking new practices to their own classrooms situation might have been beyond several of the participants. They also found the preparation very time consuming. They spent a lot of time finding and selecting materials and texts to fit into the units. How-



ever, two teachers taught their students to use graphic organizers such as webs, Venn diagrams, and charts to help them summarize and interpret reading text. These teachers found that graphic organizers were excellent tools in achieving this goal.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Participants responded positively to the training course. The feedback is very useful as input for revising content and materials for future training courses. However, positive response to the training course is not a measure of the success of the training program. Classroom visitations to observe participants applying what they learned from training course and interviews with teachers during the second phase helped to further triangulate or "compare, contrast and verify" the data results. From doing this research, the researcher soon realized that changes in teaching do not take place easily or quickly. Many teachers struggled with some of the issues discussed previously, such as designing activities and using L2. Professional development for teachers is a complex and multifaceted endeavor and is becoming more so as popularity grows for standards-based education. However, from attending this training program, the teachers became more aware of the nature of their teaching and the basis they used to select techniques, and activities they thought would work with their students. It is hoped that with more English teachers confidently using English in the classroom, the stu-

dents will have more opportunities to use English and will eventually feel that English is theirs to use. From the researcher's perspective it is difficult for teachers who themselves have learned English through traditional approaches to suddenly turn their backs on familiar classroom methods in favor of newer unfamiliar ones. Moreover, the teachers felt they did not have enough time to prepare their lessons. They would want to retain the more familiar grammar-translation and drill-and-skill methods with which they were taught and are comfortable with due to English proficiency.

More importantly, as we undergo these educational changes in Thailand, it is important to point out that the dramatic shift from a traditional grammar-oriented approach towards a communicative approach and the use of language as a tool for learning content may become overwhelming for most teachers. This is especially true in light of the fact that the majority of the teachers have not undergone the kind of training required to make a positive change out of these innovations. Even though these changes were meant to be gradual, implementation has already started and may find most teachers willing but unprepared. On the positive side, we believe that the current educational reform in Thailand will provide an impetus towards content-based instruction in settings where more traditional approaches have remained strong and greater support in small rural schools.



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