'My Students Still Can't Speak in English':
Teachers' Beliefs and Practice in ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The Integrated Syllabus for Secondary Schools (KBSM) was implemented in Malaysia in 1988. Previous studies have shown that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is rarely followed in the classroom although teachers claim to teach communicatively. This paper investigated teachers' beliefs and practices in developing students' speaking skills under the Integrated Syllabus for Secondary Schools in Malaysia. Factors which may affect teachers from using CLT in their teaching were also identified. 40 teachers participated in the semi-structured interview in order to investigate their attitudes toward CLT. Following that, two self-acclaimed communicative teachers were selected from the interview sessions for observation to verify their practices in the classroom. It was found out that both teachers acknowledge the significance of speaking in learning the English language. However, due to the national examinations, they tend not to emphasize their teaching on speaking as it is not an important component of the exam. This proves that attitudes are by no means a measurement of whether certain practices will follow. Other than that, a certain amount of discrepancy between teachers' attitudes and practice is to be expected, depending on the particular situation. Situational constrains may prevent teachers from carrying out their practices according to their attitudes or beliefs.

Keywords: CLT, attitudes, beliefs, practices, KBSM, proficiency, communicative
Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles have formed the foundation of English language syllabi for many countries including Malaysia. Implemented as early as the 1970s in Malaysia, CLT forms the basis for the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum, commonly known as the `KBSM' which was introduced and implemented in 1988. Before CLT was introduced, the structural syllabus was the mainstream approach in most Asian settings including Malaysia. A basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is that learners must learn not only to make grammatical correct propositional statements about the experiential world, but must also develop the ability to use language to get things done (Nunan, 1991). Merely being able to create grammatically correct structures in language does not necessarily enable the learner to use the language to carry out tasks in the real world.

The syllabus known as the KBSM English Language Programme for all national secondary schools is planned in accordance with the National Education Philosophy. The aim of the KBSM English Language Programme is to equip students with communicational ability and competency to perform language functions, using correct language forms and structures. It also aims to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs.

Despite having been implemented more than two decades ago, disturbing questions that plague ESL teaching and learning in Malaysia are these: 'A in SPM but cannot speak in English?' '11 years of English lessons but cannot utter a single sentence?' According to a survey conducted by Jobstreet.com, a Malaysian Employment Agency (2005), there are 33,000 human resource personnel and bosses who are currently unemployed. The main reason for this is their poor proficiency in English (56%). This is supported by a survey conducted by the Malaysian Government on Malaysian graduates where they found that two out of the three main reasons for the 60,000 Malaysian graduates failed to be employed are related to their proficiency in ESL. First, the graduates have poor English Language proficiency and second they have poor oral communication skills in English (Malaysia Today, 2005). If the situation continues, Malaysia will face problems in the competency of its Human Resource which affect nation building and the economy of the country. Realizing the seriousness of the poor competency in ESL, specifically speaking skill, has led us to carry out of this study.

According to Anderson (1981), human affective characteristics influence their way of thinking, acting and feeling in different situations. Among these affective characteristics is belief. According to Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis (2004), teachers' stated belief are their stated ideas, thoughts and knowledge about what should be done and what is preferable. This is supported by Richards and Lockhart (1996, p.30) who assert that "teachers' belief systems are founded on the goals, values, and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it".

Previous studies suggest that teachers' beliefs are seldom put into practice. Hyunh Van Hien (2006) conducted a study among three teachers in their listening/speaking classes at Cantho University in Vietnam. Data was collected using observation, questionnaires and interviews. The results show that there are more consistencies than inconsistencies between the teachers' beliefs and their practices.

On the other hand, Basturkmen et al (2004) case study found that there are great discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and their practices. This is also supported by a number of studies (e.g. Kumaradivelu, 1993; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Kuo, 1995; Nunan, 1987, Liao, 2003) who suggested that CLT principles are rarely put into practice, with most teachers professing to applying CLT but practicing more traditional approaches. Even though CLT is promoted extensively in curriculum advancement, it is often not actually practiced in the classroom (Liao, 2003). This is mainly due to their misconception of CLT and the situational constraints were a serious hindrance to their use of CLT. Karabas-Doukas (1996) also found

that "the classroom practices deviated considerably from the principles of communicative approaches" (p.93) eventhough teachers have high agreement with CLT principles.

This study seeks to investigate teachers' beliefs and practices in the teaching of speaking. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the teachers' belief regarding the importance of speaking skills in language learning and teaching?
2. What are secondary school English Language teachers' beliefs on CLT?
3. What are teachers' practices in the classroom to develop students' speaking skill?
4. What are the challenges which influence the teaching of speaking in Malaysian ESL classroom?

2.0 Methodology

This is a qualitative study. A qualitative study is especially useful when researchers need to search for meanings about a phenomenon. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) assert that qualitative research can uncover the multiple realities of a social setting. This study explores an in depth manner the realities of the teaching/learning situation in various schools in Malaysia. These schools come from different states and may have different social cultural contexts. Therefore, although such studies have been conducted in other ESL contexts, situational factors, contextual social factors, services and facilities unique to the Malaysian classroom may give rise to the distinctive perspective of the phenomenon.

2.1 Subjects

The subjects are 40 teachers from 15 schools in the states of Perak, Melaka, Kelantan, Johor and Selangor. The teachers were selected using purposive sampling. They need to be teachers who have been teaching English as a second language regardless TESL or nonTESL trained. Following the interview, two teachers who had high positive attitude towards CLT were chosen for the purpose of classroom observation.

2.2. Research Instruments

Data was collected using semi structured interviews and two class observations. Semi structured interview was carried out to elicit data on teachers' beliefs and practices in developing students' speaking skills. According to Marshall & Rossman (1999), interviews are useful in exploring participants experiences, interpretations and meanings. The semi structured interview allows for in depth information gathering and free responses from the teachers.

An interview construct which comprises seven sections was developed as a guideline for the interview session. The first section (Section A) elicits the respondents' and their students' background. Section B and C elicits the respondents' and their students' perceived most and least proficient language skill. Section D contains questions to obtain information on the teachers' beliefs about ESL teaching, while Section E consists of questions to obtain information of teachers' beliefs towards CLT. Section F consists of questions to elicit activities that are carried out by the respondents in the teaching of speaking or in other words, teachers' practices in the classroom. The final section aims to obtain information on factors challenging teachers in the teaching of speaking.

The classroom observation uses a coding system adapted from Liao (2003) which seeks to identify if the teachers were teaching using the communicative approach.

2.3 Data Collection

Prior to collecting the data, the letters of permission were obtained from the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the various State Education Departments. These letters were then used to seek the permission from the schools which were randomly selected.

2.4 Data Analysis

At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the interview was made clear to the teachers and the consent for recording down the session and jotting short notes during the session was sought. Each interview session lasted about 15 to 30 minutes. The classroom observations lasted for 1 hour and 20 minutes.

The data in this study was analyzed concurrently as the data collection. The researcher employed content analysis where key issues, recurrent events or activities in the data are identified. These were then categorized and became a focus for the researcher as more data were collected. These categories were defined to enable the researchers to identify phrases that describe the relevant items. These phrases were then compiled under the relevant categories and coded as themes. These categories and themes are used to explain the results.

3.0 Results

The results will be presented according to the various sections of the questionnaires while the discussion will be organized according to the research questions.

3.1. Teacher's Language Competency

The results (refer to table 1) indicated that 36.2% teachers' perceived reading as their most proficient English language skills. Among the reasons given were their heavy emphasis on the teaching of reading , reading as a mean to improve their pronunciation, vocabulary and communication skill, as the key to language learning, as a mean in comprehending and as a hobby. This is followed by speaking and writing.

Table 1 Teachers' Most Proficient Language Skill

Reading	36.2%
Speaking	34%
Writing	21.3%
Listening	8.5%

42.5% teachers reported that their least proficient skill is writing. Among the reasons given are as follows;
- don't have enough time to write,
- not a good writer,
- need to have a lot of vocabulary in writing,
- difficulty in writing, writing as a cognitively demanding activity.

This is followed by reading, listening and speaking with 13% each where the reasons given were difficulty in concentration, lack of emphasis in the curriculum and the tendency to forget what they have listened. 13% teachers reported they have no un-proficient skill while 3 % teachers reported vocabulary as the least proficient skill.

Table 2 Teachers' Least Proficient Language Skill

Writing	45%
Reading	13%
Speaking	13%
Listening	13%
None	13%
Vocabulary	3%

3.2. Students' Language Competency

When asked about their students language competency, it is found that students are most proficient in reading 50% (refer to table 3). This is followed by writing (23.3%) and speaking (16.6%).

Table 3 Students' Most Proficient Language Skill

Reading	50%
Writing	23.3%
Speaking	16.6%
Listening	10%

Students reported to be least proficient in writing and speaking (refer to table 4). The students in the weaker class may be able to read the text aloud but without understanding the meaning. They are also able to write by memorizing the written text. Only two teachers reported listening as the students' least proficient skill followed by reading.

Table 4 Students' Least Proficient Language Skill

Writing	48.2%
Speaking	34%
Reading	10.7%
Listening	7.%

3.3. Teachers' Belief about ESL Teaching

46.4% teachers believe speaking as the most important language skill in helping the students learn the language (refer to table 5). Among the reasons given are as follows:

- one is judged by how one speaks

- speaking helps to learn the language

- If one is able to speak, one is more interested in learning the rules, in learning to write, in making meaning, in improving pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary
- preparation for the real world
- an important mean of communication
- students are able to express their feelings and share their knowledge

This is followed by reading (28.6%) and the reasons given are as follows: Reading as the basis for language learning and that student can understand better when they read. The two least important skills are writing and listening.

Table 5. Most important language skill in helping students learn the language and Teaching Emphasis

Most important language skill in helping students learn the language		Teaching emphasis	
Speaking	46.4%	Writing	54%
Reading	28.6%	Reading	22.2%
Writing	14.28%	Speaking	20%
Listening	10.7%	Listening	2%
		Grammar	2%

96.6% teachers acknowledge speaking as an important skills in their teaching. However, the skill that is given most emphasis in teaching is writing which is 54%. The most prominent reason given was that this is an important element in the examination. Infact, this response was gathered at 100%. The following are some of excerpts from the interviews
- 'It is an exam oriented system',
- 'the system has an effect on our teaching'
- , 'by the end of the day, I'll try my best to fulfill the exam',
- 'for exam purpose, we have to write a lot'.

Reading (22.2%) is the next most emphasized skill and the reasons given are as follows: it is an important component of the exam, it helps them to understand the language and it improves their pronunciation skill. Next is speaking (20%)and the reasons given are as preparation for the oral exam and that students express themselves. Finally is listing and grammar at 2% each.

40% teachers reported that they are most comfortable in teaching reading and speaking. 62% teachers reported writing as the skill they are least comfortable in teaching. 21% teachers reported that they have no problems in teaching any skills.

3.4 Teachers' Beliefs on CLT

When asked what about their familiarity of CLT, it was found that about 50% of the teachers do not know much or do not know anything about CLT at all. (refer to table 6) 20% teachers reported they are not familiar with CLT while 30% teachers are reported not to have a basic knowledge of what CLT is. It was found that 43.4% think that it is a good approach. About 3% reported that CLT does not help in language learning.

Table 6 Teachers' Familiar in CLT

It's a good approach	43.4%
Don't know at all	30%
Not familiar	20%
Not a good approach	6%

When asked if CLT is helpful in learning the different language skills, the respondents reported that CLT is helpful in speaking (46.4%),in reading (28.6%), 14.28% in writing and listening (10.7 %) (refer to table 7) . Their reasons are listed in table 7:

Table 7 Teachers' Beliefs on CLT

Speaking (46.4%)	Reading (28.6%)	Writing (14.28%)	Listening(10.7%)
'it's the time when the students are given the opportunity to speak' 'the more you talk, the more you learn' 'it is student centered and students are free to express themselves with no restrictions' 'students are not frightened by grammar rules'	'speaking will more less expose students to different kind of knowledge. What they acquired from their speaking, they will know it in their reading' 'speaking can enhance their vocabulary which can be used in their reading' 'can learn sentence structure/pattern for the passages'	'students can share ideas with friends and apply it in their writing' 'what is being conveyed can be expressed in writing' 'by speaking and sharing with each other, they will get more ideas on what to write'	'communication is two-way' 'when interacting, a student will be forced to speak and listen' 'students learn by listening to the language' 'when one is talking, the other partner needs to listen effectively' 'speaking and listening come hand in hand'

Activities In the Teaching of Speaking Skills
There were various responses received on the activities which are used to develop speaking skills. However, only the top 5 and the bottom 5 will be mentioned (refer to table 8). Role play seems to be the most popular activity used to developed students' oral communication skill. This is followed by group discussion, language games, pair work and oral presentation. Role play is also reported as the activity students enjoy most specifically for the good students. The poor students prefer language games or have no interest at all.

Role play also is reported to be the activity students enjoy least. This is followed by storytelling and interview. It is reported that students found role playing and interview scary because they don't have the confidence while storytelling is childish. Public speaking, brainstorming, oral drills are also unpopular activities.

Table 8: Activities in the teaching of speaking

Top 5 activities	Bottom 5 activities
Role play	Role play
Group discussion	Story telling
Language games	Interview
Pair work	Public speaking
Oral presentation	Brain storming and oral drills

Group discussion is reported as the most helpful activity in encouraging oral communication. According to the respondents, group discussion helps the students feel relaxed among their peers and they are free to share their ideas. Teachers also found role play and class discussion useful.

All the teachers found pair work and group work useful as they allow students to be more comfortable, more confident, less threatened and less shy to share ideas among themselves. It allows everybody a chance to participate and lead to more ideas and more quantity of talk. Most teachers prefer the group size to be between 4 to 5 students. If there are more than five, there will be some students who may not be taking part.

3.5. Challenges faced by Teachers in Using CLT.

The challenges faced by teachers in using CLT can be classified into 12 categories. There are as follows:

Table 9

Categories	Factors
1. The curriculum specifications	• have to follow curriculum and finish the syllabus
2. The assigned textbook	• The textbook is too easy for good students, but too difficult for weak students. • I have to provide extra materials.
3. The requirements of the public examinations	• Exam-oriented • Speaking not an important component of the exam • The syllabus may be CLT, but the exam is not.
4. Large class size	• Difficult to carry out communicative activity in large classes. • discipline is difficult due to large class • Noise level is a challenge
5. Students' low proficiency in English	• Weak students need a lot of help • Difficulties in finding the right word to express themselves. • Lack of vocabulary • Students from urban schools speak broken English with such confidence that they actually believe it to be correct and accurate. Since the mistake has been embedded and fossilized in them, it is difficult to get them to change. • Students in weaker class feel they can't do things so they don't attempt at all.

6. Students' passive participation	- Shyness - Reluctant to speak - Afraid of making mistakes - Low self confidence - Afraid their friends would laugh at them
7. Students' negative attitude towards learning ESL	- Perceive English as not important - Don't need to speak English outside of classroom - Students complain learning English is boring - Lack of encouragement from home
8. Students' lack of motivation	- No interest in participating - Lack of interest - Lazy
9. Lack of time to complete the syllabus	- Time constraints - this is very time consuming so little time to do anything else
10. Lack of teaching materials	Unavailability of teaching aids
11. Teacher's lack of oral proficiency	Teacher not confident in speaking
12. Teacher's lack of interest	A lot of time is wasted this way

3.6. Classroom Observations

Two teachers were selected for classroom observations. For the purpose of anonymity, they are referred to as teacher Lee and Devi. The key features of the instructional practices are as follows

i.   Error treatment
Lee claimed earlier in the interview that she did not correct students' mistake in her lesson, however, she was seen to be correcting the students' mistakes quite often during the group presentation.

Devi on the other hand, did not correct her students' grammatical errors.

ii.   Class practice
Lee spent 15 minutes on the class discussion. Initially, the students were passive, and Lee has to call the students by their names. This is probably because of the presence of the observer. After some time, the students began to participate better and answer her questions voluntarily.

Devi followed the presentation-practice-production procedures. Students were encouraged to use the language. Devi acted as the monitor during the practice and production stages.

iii.   Group work
The bulk of the lesson was focused on group work. Lee reminded the students to speak in English as most of them were speaking in their mother tongue. The students responded by switching to English whenever Lee went near their group.

The students wrote their discussion in English and raised their hands to get Lee's help to find the correct words and expressions.

Devi used both pair and group activities. Students seated in front of the class, who are mostly girls, seemed to be engrossed in their discussion. However, those seated at the back, mostly boys, were heard talking about other things.

iv.   Students' oral production
In Lee's class, students spoke in English when they presented their proposal. However, when they spoke among themselves, they would switch to their L1.

Devi's students used mostly English in their group work. Some L1 were used by the boys sitting at the back of the class.

4.0 Discussion

1. What are teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of speaking skills in language learning and teaching?

Generally, the teachers reported that their most proficient skill in English is speaking and that their least proficient skill is writing. On the other hand, students are most proficient in reading and least proficient in both writing and speaking. Most teachers believe that speaking is the most important language skill in helping their students learn the language.

Despite acknowledging the importance of speaking, when it comes to teaching, the emphasis given is mostly on writing. This is not due to the lack of teachers' speaking competency. The main reason seems to be due to the fact that teachers need to prepare students for the national exam. Writing is an important component in the national exam and teachers need to prepare their students to do well in the national exam. All the teachers are found to teach the language for examination purposes. Therefore, even though most teachers acknowledge that speaking is the single most important skill in language learning and that speaking is also one of the students' least proficient English Language skill, because of the exams, it is not their main focus in teaching.

It is also found that if speaking lessons are conducted, they are mostly carried out in non exam-taking classes. Good students are reported to enjoy the speaking activities while poor students found such lessons challenging. Students in exam-taking classes perceive speaking activities as a waste of time and expect their teachers to focus their lessons on the examination.

2. What are secondary school English Language teachers' beliefs on CLT?

Teachers have a positive belief towards CLT and that it is useful in developing all language skills. Unfortunately, there are too many teachers who are either not quite familiar with or completely ignorant of CLT. Therefore, they do not conduct many speaking activities and unaware if CLT can be used to develop the four language skills.

3. What are teachers' practices in the classroom to develop students' speaking skill?

   Role play is the most popular activity used to develop students' speaking skill and it is also reported to be the activity enjoyed most, especially the good students. The poor students enjoy role play least and prefer language games. In worse scenarios, they have no interest in speaking activities at all. Teachers also carry out both pair work and group work and found them useful in creating a conducive environment for language learning.

4. What are the challenges which influence the teaching of speaking in Malaysian ESL classroom?

The challenges faced in teaching speaking in Malaysia seem to be related to situational constraints and ignorance. A challenging constraint is that there is a great discrepancy between the syllabus and the public exam. Speaking skill is an important component in the syllabus but the exam is not. The speaking skill is not a high priority in the national exam and since Malaysian teachers tend to teach for the exam, speaking is not a priority in their teaching.

Other situational challenges include large classes, lack of teaching materials, the need to complete the syllabus and the assigned textbook. On the students' part, many students are passive, lack motivation and have negative attitude towards learning ESL. There are also students whose oral proficiency in English is too low for speaking activities to be carried out.

Teachers' ignorance is another challenge. There are also teachers who perceive that teaching speaking is a waste of time. To a great extend, the success of the nation depends its people. One of the reasons many graduates are not hired is because they are not proficient in oral communication skills. Results of the study suggest that teachers acknowledge the importance of speaking. In fact, they reported speaking as the most important skill in language learning. However, due to the national examinations, they tend not to emphasize their teaching on speaking as it is not an important component of the exam.

When conducting speaking classes, teachers face many challenges and many of these challenges are situational such as requirement of the public examination and large classes. There are also too many teachers who are ignorant of CLT. Those who have positive belief on the importance of CLT tend to have a good understanding of it but they could not carry it out due to the situational constraints as mentioned above. There seems to be a mismatch between what the country needs and what the country offers. The country needs people who are orally competent, but the students produced seem to be those taught to write and to read. Thus, it is of no surprise that students with grade "A" in English at the "O" level are found not able to converse in English.

It is high time that ESL practitioners reflect and take positive steps to rectify this situation. As speaking skill is vital, the examination department may want to consider reviewing the examination so that more emphasis is given on assessing speaking skills especially natural, spontaneous speaking. The teachers should be sent, from time to time, for in service trainings to equip themselves with the current teaching methods and materials in the teaching of speaking. It is hoped that when more prominence is placed on the teaching of speaking, the country will produce more orally competent ESL learners which can lead to a more developed nation.

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