Recently, a number of studies have been conducted to discover the difficulties of implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) in EFL environments, but few of these studies have been conducted in Vietnam. CLT is not common practice in Vietnam, but, according to a 1998 *Vietnam News* article, it is becoming more and more common as the government carries out educational reform. Teachers' colleges are beginning to add new methodologies to their repertoire. In addition, many expatriate teachers of English are coming to Vietnam, and with them, Western teaching practices, including CLT. Where you find a group of these teachers, you will find “horror stories” of lessons gone awry and an amalgam of ideas for educational reform, classroom management, and professional development. For this reason, I decided to investigate the problem, in particular, Western teachers’ ideas regarding the difficulties of implementing CLT in Vietnam.

Defining “CLT”

Before we begin, we must formulate a definition for “CLT.” “CLT starts with a theory of language as communication, and its goal is to develop learners’ communicative competence” (Li). The underlying assumption of CLT is that the goal of language study is to communicate in that language, with a contrasting approach being to approach the language as a study of form rather than “function interrelated with form” (Candlin). Meaning is what is communicated, therefore, CLT is tailored to get at meaning. Learners are given opportunities to negotiate meaning in class. A CLT classroom is learner-centered. “Far from being a ‘transmitter’ of knowledge, the teacher is a ‘facilitator’. Far from having minimal teacher-student interaction, a communicative classroom holds such interaction to be indispensable” (Nguyen). Characterized by high participation, the CLT classroom becomes a place for students to engage in meaningful language use. Authentic materials, functional tasks, and group and pair work are significant aspects of CLT.

A brief mention should be made of the fact that it is not entirely clear if Vietnam needs CLT or not. A study conducted in China discovered that Chinese teachers felt that CLT was good for Chinese people going abroad, but not for Chinese students staying at home. Chinese English majors require the ability to read technical articles and translate documents. For this, traditional teaching methodologies are preferred (Burnaby and Sun). Is this the case in Vietnam? This question needs to be answered. In any case, the fact is that CLT has already been introduced to Vietnam and it is spreading, though on a limited scale.

Methodology for the Research

**Project Design**

Beginning in January, 1999, I conducted a study on the difficulties of implementing CLT in Vietnam. I first ran a pilot study with a group of 13 foreign teachers teaching English in China. These teachers were part of a program organized by the English Language Institute (ELI). The pilot study was a written questionnaire adapted from Li, and was intended to furnish ideas for a final instrument I could use with ELI teachers in Vietnam.

The final questionnaire included both open-ended questions and a checklist (Figure 1). This second survey was administered in February, 1999, to teachers serving with ELI in Vietnam. Eighteen surveys of 25 distributed were returned.

Next, I read through the completed surveys and put together a format for an interview. For reasons of cost, time, and distance, I decided to make this an electronic interview, and so distributed a list of open-ended questions and a checklist (Figure 1). This second survey was administered in February, 1999, to teachers serving with ELI in Vietnam. Eighteen surveys of 25 distributed were returned.

Next, I read through the completed surveys and put together a format for an interview.
logue with each teacher until I felt that I had a good understanding of their perspectives. I asked each participant to provide as much information as possible, and in most cases they did. All 18 participants completed this electronic interview.

Project Participants

The 18 participants were teachers teaching English with the English Language Institute in Vietnam. All were foreigners with various backgrounds in EFL. The fact that the subjects of my research were Westerners limits the scope of this study. Further research should be done to discover difficulties that national Vietnamese teachers are experiencing in trying to implement CLT. Those who participated in this study had been in Vietnam for at least five months prior to receiving the survey. The average age of the participants was 34.5. There were 11 males and seven females. Sixteen participants taught in universities, while the other two taught in a foreign language center. Their teaching experience ranged from five months to eight years. (For specific details on project participants, see Figure 2.)

Project Data

I sought to interpret the data using qualitative data analysis. (For a description of these techniques, see Nunan or Glesne.) I followed closely the example set forth by Li. I read and reread the data until themes and categories emerged. I analyzed the surveys and electronic interview transcripts until I could recognize repeating themes. From these themes, I drew three categories for results, discussed below.

Results of the Research

The difficulties reported by the teachers fall into three main categories: those caused by the students, by the educational system, and by the teacher. While reading through the data, I discovered 139 total references to difficulties caused by students, 89 references to difficulties caused by the educational system, and 65 references to difficulties caused by the teachers themselves. In addition, a number of common themes emerged within each category. (See Figure 3.)

Difficulties from Students

Most frequently, students were mentioned as a source of difficulties in implementing CLT. Four specific problems surfaced:
- lack of motivation for communicative competence.
- resistance to class participation.
- using Vietnamese during group work.
- low English proficiency.

Fourteen of the 18 participants reported a lack of student motivation for communicative competence. Most students seem to be concerned with passing exams, most of which do not test for communicative competence. The students see employment as the main goal, and most jobs in Vietnam do not require fluency in English. “They are motivated to pass exams to move up some ladder toward a better job, but that does not often (in Vietnam’s employment system) seem to include real fluency” [Digory]. Laziness and apathy were also mentioned as components of this problem. It appears that many students are not applying themselves in their English studies.

Fourteen of the 18 participants referred to student resistance to class participation. Anxiety, laziness, and unfamiliarity with communicative lessons seem to be the main culprits. Most of the teachers have found group work and discussions difficult to implement due to these reasons. “They worry about what other classmates will think or comment about their ability. They are not used to CLT. I think once they develop some ability and confidence and familiarity with CLT, then participation will increase” [Trufflehunter]. Even with pair work, teachers run into difficulties. “My students have no desire to work together in pairs. I can get my class to participate in class only as a whole, with games involving competition working the best. Every attempt to have the students work in pairs fails” [Drinian].

Thirteen of the 18 teachers reported problems with students using Vietnamese in group work. Anxiety, apathy, and unfamiliarity with CLT are the sources of this difficulty. “They find communication easier in Vietnamese than in English, and they’re often lazy, especially if there’s a chance they might look silly to those around them” [Digory]. “Typical class, I pass out a sheet about survival on a desert island, you know, the one almost every confused English teacher does at least once in his/her career. At first, students point out English objects and say the names, then dive into a symphony of Vietnamese chatter and unobstructed problem-solving. Telling them to stop works for a little while” [Duffer].

Twelve of the 18 teachers referred to students’ low English proficiency. Although most teachers were optimistic about the adequacy of their students’ levels for CLT, most teachers made at least one mention of a difficulty arising from this problem.
**Difficulties from Educational System**

The second category that caused difficulties for the teachers was the educational system. Specifically, this included three specific factors:

- lack of conducive facilities.
- large class sizes.
- multi-level classes.

Fourteen of the 18 participants reported a lack of conducive facilities for CLT. The desks were a common source of headaches. Many teachers suggested round tables or desks that were more movable. Noise was another common complaint. The noise levels outside the classroom often made communication inside the classroom impossible. Bad chalkboards, no overhead projectors, and missing light bulbs were also problems.

Twelve of the 18 teachers named large class sizes as a major problem. Most class sizes hovered around 40 students, but some were as large as 105. In general, it seems the average class size in Vietnam is around 65 students. Often classes are divided in half for subjects such as Speaking, but some schools have not caught on yet, and teachers are struggling to design appropriate exercises.

Five of the 18 participants mentioned multi-level classes as a constraint in implementing CLT in Vietnam. It is not uncommon to have a wide range of students in each class. It is difficult for students to complete an exercise if some of them are bored, but others are overwhelmed. It is also difficult to design lessons to meet the communicative needs of every student. “Placing them in classes where all students are at the same level would be very helpful, but that isn’t going to happen at this university” [Cornelius]. “Some of my students know enough to be on Jeopardy, so I’m not putting them all down” [Duffer].

**Difficulties from Teachers**

The subjects also regarded themselves as a major constraint on implementing CLT in Vietnam. Three themes that emerged were:

- feelings of inadequacy.
- lack of training in CLT.
- the inability to assess communicative competence.

Ten of the 18 participants confessed to feeling inadequate to implement CLT in Vietnam. In the interviews, these were random, self-deprecating comments that were unsubstantiated, unlinked to any known cause (such as a lack of experience or training). Sometimes sounding like humility, each self-abasing remark was perceived to be a note of frustration or a confession of inability. It is difficult to infer why these statements were so prevalent. More research is needed. “I am not good at eliciting responses or participation” [Digory]. “My ability as a teacher is a limiting factor” [Drinian].

Nine of the 18 teachers reported that they lacked training in CLT. These were occasions when the participants’ own inabilities were specifically linked to a lack of training. “I don’t think I’ve had enough training, as I had never heard of the concept [of CLT] prior to this survey” [Lucy]. “I could use a lot more training in this area... I didn’t go running into the classroom with my knowledge guns loaded or anything, but I had enough to get myself into trouble, and I think I would be more interested in better training now that I have tried to teach” [Duffer].

Six of the 18 participants reported that they were not able adequately to assess communicative competence. Testing is already complicated enough. Attempting to assess communicative competence makes it more complex. “I have no experience. There weren’t any methods given to me in training to help me get a good grasp of class competence” [Drinian].

**Discussion of the Research**

Before Vietnam can truly benefit from CLT, a number of changes must take place. These changes must occur not only in Vietnam, but also among expatriate teachers attempting to implement CLT.

**Student Attitudes**

First, we need to pay attention to students’ attitudes. Until CLT becomes a norm in Vietnam, students are going to resist this way of learning. So, it is up to those who want to use CLT to reorient students to this methodology. Students need to relearn their role as learners, the teacher’s role in the classroom, and the basic nature of language. Further research should be done to discover better ways to introduce students to these new concepts and this way of learning. Additionally, student anxiety is an important issue. As teachers, we need to be aware of students’ anxiety levels and take steps to lower them. Until students are confident, they will remain reticent. A recent study shows that problems often attributed to students’ low English proficiency are actually caused by student anxiety (Tsui). My findings strengthen that conclusion.
Figure 1. Research questionnaire.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a teaching methodology that emphasizes fluency over accuracy. This approach to teaching stresses the use of language and the ability to communicate. CLT methodology is more student-centered than the typical Asian methodology. It focuses on practice and production as opposed to the common “teacher-as-expert-who-always-lectures” model. CLT exercises take the form of group work, discussions, games, songs, etc. If you are unclear on the meaning of CLT, please ask for clarification before you proceed.

Name:
Age:
Years Teaching EFL:
Levels Taught:

(1) Have you ever tried to implement CLT in your Vietnamese classroom?

(2) How would you rate your success? (1-10, 10 is most successful, 1 is not successful)

(3) What is the biggest difficulty you have ever encountered in trying to teach communicatively at any school in Vietnam?

(4) Please write a check mark before the following difficulties you have experienced. (Adapted from Li.)

- [ ] Too little time to develop CLT materials.
- [ ] Misconceptions about what CLT actually is.
- [ ] Few opportunities to learn how to use CLT.
- [ ] Feeling deficient to facilitate a communicative class.
- [ ] Low student English proficiency.
- [ ] Lack of student motivation for attaining fluency.
- [ ] Student resistance to class participation.
- [ ] Class sizes are too large to conduct CLT.
- [ ] The school's grammar-based exams do not justify using CLT.
- [ ] No money for materials or equipment.
- [ ] Few people with expertise to turn to for advice.
- [ ] No information in the research to apply CLT to overseas (EFL) settings.
- [ ] No assessment tools to test for communicative competence (fluency).
- [ ] School administration discourages CLT.
- [ ] Lack of culturally sensitive materials.
- [ ] Students use the mother-tongue during group work.
- [ ] Lack of CLT materials.
- [ ] Lack of conducive facilities.

(5) Are there any other difficulties you have encountered?
“I believe it [students’ English level] is adequate, but I think my students don’t think so. If they are beginners, then they can use simple communication. They aren’t confident in what they can do, so that stops them from getting into CLT” [Trufflehunter].

Educational Values

Second, we need to look at Vietnam’s approach to education. If CLT is going to be successful, basic values in Vietnam’s educational system need to be questioned. “In a typical Asian society, where teachers are expected simply to transmit knowledge to students, knowledge is seen as being something that can be handed down...[This] would appear to hinder language learning” (Nguyen). If a teacher-centered classroom is detrimental to English studies, then CLT may be the solution. Once CLT methodology is prioritized, administrators will be able to implement needed changes. Simple things such as desks and chairs should be designed with a “new classroom” in mind. The elimination of outside noise seems basic even in a non-CLT environment, but noise level problems remain an issue in Vietnamese classrooms. Class sizes can be adjusted, with learners finding themselves in classes with students of the same level or ability.

Teacher Competence

Third, expatriate teachers need to master CLT methodology. CLT methodology is a “Western method.” Since many Vietnamese teachers are not able to travel abroad to witness this way of learning in its original context, they are going to evaluate this method by watching us. If CLT is truly what Vietnam needs, then those coming from the West must equip themselves with the necessary tools before arriving. At the moment, ELI is sending teachers who feel inadequate. This needs to change. Encouragement may be the missing element, assuming that all the teachers are capable. But some teachers with ELI had no prior experience. Many also noted that ELI training was not sufficient in itself to equip them with the necessary tools to feel competent with CLT.

Summary

This research has shown that teachers using CLT face many difficulties in Vietnam. Whether or not CLT should be implemented in Vietnam is a question for another study. Vietnam should produce its own research on the usefulness of CLT in attaining its educational goals. In this study, we have discovered that in trying to use CLT, expatriate teachers are running into many problems. The results imply that changes are needed in student and classroom orientations. In addition, if we as Western teachers insist on using CLT in the classroom, then we must be adequately trained and we must help Vietnamese students adapt to this new way of learning.

References

Please note that in the article bibliographic references are in parantheses, while quotes from project participants are in brackets.


Nguyen, V.D. “Cultural Differences in English Language Training.” Teacher’s Edition 1, pp. 9-12, October 1999.

If CLT is truly what Vietnam needs, then those coming from the West must equip themselves with the necessary tools before arriving.
**Figure 2. Backgrounds of participants in study.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years teaching</th>
<th>Location(s)</th>
<th>College year or levels taught</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trufflehunter</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Dalat</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>.5</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>Hanoi</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Haiphong</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Haiphong</td>
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*Pseudonyms are used in place of actual names. In the article, brackets indicate quotations from participants' electronic interviews.
In addition to AskERIC (page 13), another excellent source of information is Encyclopædia Britannica Online, opened this past October. The Internet address is www.eb.com, though if you know what you are looking for, it is best to go straight to search.eb.com.

The search function is intuitive and efficient to use. You can enter a word, a phrase, or a question. Once the first wave of results is found, you can narrow your search or make it more restrictive. Each result lists separately features such as articles, photographs, and maps, and one click takes you straight there. Another feature is a button to click to prepare the material for printing—basically, it simplifies or cleans up the layout and highlights the citation.

The site also features a Britannica Internet Guide and Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. An “Explore” menu focuses on geography and culture, famous people, and world history. The “Spotlights” feature is for the casual browser—on the day I visited, “D-Day” and “Dinosaurs” had been highlighted. All 32 volumes and 44 million words of this venerable encyclopedia are available free!