

## EMPOWERING EFL TEACHERS IN THAILAND: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN IMPLEMENTING THE CLT APPROACH

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### ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi tantangan dan strategi yang dihadapi oleh guru Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) di Thailand dalam mengimplementasikan pendekatan Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Melalui metode literature review, artikel ini menelaah berbagai studi terdahulu yang berkaitan dengan pelatihan guru, keterbatasan kontekstual, serta praktik pengajaran komunikatif di ruang kelas EFL. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa guru di Thailand seringkali menghadapi kendala seperti kurangnya pelatihan profesional, ukuran kelas yang besar, kurikulum yang berorientasi pada ujian, serta rendahnya kepercayaan diri siswa untuk berbicara. Di sisi lain, sejumlah strategi seperti penggunaan kegiatan kolaboratif, scaffolding, dan pendekatan berbasis tugas terbukti efektif dalam meningkatkan kompetensi komunikatif siswa. Simpulan dari kajian ini menekankan perlunya dukungan berkelanjutan dalam pengembangan profesional guru serta pelatihan berbasis praktik agar implementasi CLT dapat berjalan secara optimal di konteks EFL Thailand. Implikasi dari studi ini juga menyarankan pentingnya penyesuaian kebijakan pendidikan untuk mendukung strategi pembelajaran komunikatif yang lebih adaptif.*

**Kata Kunci:** CLT, guru EFL, Thailand, strategi pengajaran, pengembangan profesional.

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the challenges and strategies experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Thailand in implementing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Using a literature review method, this article examines previous research related to teacher training, contextual constraints, and communicative teaching practices in EFL classrooms. Findings indicate that Thai teachers often face obstacles such as lack of professional training, large class sizes, exam-oriented curricula, and students' low speaking confidence. However, strategies such as collaborative activities, scaffolding techniques, and task-based learning have shown to be effective in enhancing students' communicative competence. The study concludes that continuous professional development and practice-based training are essential for optimal CLT implementation in Thai EFL contexts. The implications highlight the need for educational policy adjustments to support more adaptive communicative teaching strategies.

**Keywords:** CLT, EFL teachers, Thailand, teaching strategies, professional development.

### INTRODUCTION

The global shift from traditional grammar-based methods to more communicative and student-centered approaches has positioned Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) at the forefront of English language pedagogy. CLT emphasizes authentic communication, fluency, and learners' active participation, making it a preferred approach for improving communicative competence in EFL contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, the Ministry of Education has actively promoted CLT through curriculum reforms aimed at producing graduates with practical English skills suited for international communication (Kirkpatrick,

2012). However, despite policy-level encouragement, many EFL teachers in Thailand struggle with classroom-level implementation, especially in public schools where resources and training are often limited.

Multiple studies have revealed that Thai EFL teachers frequently face both structural and pedagogical challenges in adopting CLT. Littlewood (2007) and Nunan (2003) highlighted common barriers such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and a lack of appropriate teaching materials aligned with CLT principles. Bi and Zhang (2022) found that rigid curricula and exam-oriented systems further hinder interactive teaching. Wedell (2008) emphasized that teacher training

programs in Thailand often provide limited exposure to communicative methodologies, resulting in low teacher confidence and limited ability to facilitate interactive classroom tasks. Moreover, Khamkhien (2010) observed that many Thai students are hesitant to use English in class due to fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence, which adds to the difficulty of creating a communicative environment.

To address these constraints, researchers have proposed various strategies to adapt CLT to local realities. Carless (2004) suggested using collaborative learning to reduce pressure on individual learners and promote peer support. Ellis (2003) advocated task-based learning (TBL) as a way to encourage real-world language use while still maintaining structure. These approaches offer flexibility, allowing teachers to modify communicative activities according to students' needs and institutional limitations. Scaffolding techniques, such as language support and modeling, have also proven helpful in gradually building students' communicative confidence.

Given the persistent gap between national educational objectives and classroom realities, it is essential to explore how Thai EFL teachers navigate these issues. Understanding the specific strategies teachers employ and the contextual factors influencing their choices will provide insights into practical ways to enhance CLT implementation. This literature review therefore synthesizes key findings on the barriers and adaptations related to CLT in Thailand, while also underscoring the importance of ongoing professional development and supportive policies to ensure the sustainability of communicative approaches in EFL education.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach, focusing on EFL teachers in Thailand as the primary unit of analysis. The case study method was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the contextual realities, perceived challenges, and strategies employed by Thai EFL teachers in implementing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach within real classroom settings. This approach allows for a holistic exploration of how CLT is practiced, adapted, or resisted in specific educational contexts.

To support the study, a literature-based analysis was conducted by reviewing relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and empirical studies published between 2003 and 2023. The review focused specifically on teacher-centered perspectives regarding CLT implementation. Sources were identified through academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect, using keywords including Communicative Language Teaching, EFL teachers in Thailand, teaching strategies, implementation challenges, and professional development. Only studies that directly addressed EFL teachers' experiences and practices related to CLT—particularly in the context of Thailand and Southeast Asia—were included in the review.

Thematic content analysis was employed to identify, categorize, and synthesize recurring themes across the literature, with particular attention given to common barriers (e.g., large class sizes, lack of training, time constraints) and teacher-driven strategies (e.g., scaffolding, task-based learning, adaptation to local contexts). This analytical process helped develop a clearer understanding of how teachers navigate systemic constraints and what pedagogical innovations they adopt in response.

By placing Thai EFL teachers at the center of the investigation, this study aims to provide deeper insights into the lived realities of CLT implementation, while also highlighting the practical and policy-level support needed to foster sustainable, communicative teaching practices in the Thai EFL context.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the reviewed literature, this section discusses the main challenges faced by EFL teachers in implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Thailand, as well as the strategies they use to overcome those challenges. Although the Thai government has encouraged the adoption of CLT through curriculum reforms, many teachers still struggle to apply it effectively in real classroom situations. By looking at both the obstacles and the efforts made to deal with them, this section provides a clearer picture of how teachers adapt CLT to suit their local teaching contexts. It also reflects on what can be done to better support teachers in making communicative teaching more effective and sustainable. While these challenges are not unique to Thailand, they

highlight how educational reforms often overlook the realities faced by teachers on the ground, especially in non-Western contexts where communicative approaches may clash with traditional classroom expectations.

Several recurring challenges emerged from the literature regarding the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Thailand:

1. **Limited Professional Training and CLT Understanding.** Many EFL teachers in Thailand lack adequate training in CLT methodology. Studies such as those by Wedell (2008) and Khamkhien (2010) reveal that teacher education programs often emphasize traditional grammar-translation methods rather than communicative pedagogy. As a result, teachers struggle to shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered communication-focused teaching.
2. **Large Class Sizes and Time Constraints.** Thai public schools often have classrooms with over 40 students, making it difficult to conduct pair work, group discussions, or personalized speaking activities essential in CLT (Littlewood, 2007). Limited instructional time further hampers teachers' ability to engage students in meaningful communicative tasks.
3. **Exam-Oriented Curriculum.** Despite national support for communicative teaching, the actual classroom practices are still shaped by an exam-oriented culture. High-stakes testing often focuses on grammar and vocabulary, discouraging teachers from implementing activities that develop speaking and listening skills (Nunan, 2003; Carless, 2004).
4. **Learners' Low Confidence and Passive Learning Culture.** Thai students often hesitate to speak English due to fear of making mistakes and cultural norms that discourage classroom participation. This results in a passive learning environment that contradicts the interactive nature of CLT (Khamkhien, 2010; Bi & Zhang, 2022).

These obstacles not only limit the success of CLT but also affect teacher motivation and students' language learning outcomes. Understanding these constraints is crucial, not only to critique the existing system but also to inform better training and policy decisions. Fortunately, the literature reveals several

adaptive strategies that teachers employ to overcome these challenges. These strategies demonstrate their resilience and creativity in navigating the difficulties of implementing communicative approaches in diverse classroom contexts. The following discussion highlights some of the key approaches teachers use to support effective CLT implementation.

1. **Task-Based and Collaborative Learning Activities.** Incorporating task-based learning (TBL) and collaborative activities helps create a more interactive learning environment. These strategies allow students to use language meaningfully and work in groups, making them more comfortable speaking English (Ellis, 2003; Carless, 2004).
2. **Scaffolding and Gradual Skill-Building.** Scaffolding techniques, such as modeling, guided practice, and the use of sentence starters, have proven effective in helping students gain confidence in their language use. This approach allows teachers to support students gradually as they transition from controlled to spontaneous communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).
3. **Code-Switching and Use of L1 Strategically.** Several studies support the strategic use of students' first language (L1) to explain complex concepts or classroom instructions. This minimizes confusion and enhances comprehension during communicative tasks, particularly in lower-level classrooms (Littlewood, 2007).
4. **Reflective Practice and Professional Development.** Teachers who engage in reflective practice and seek out workshops or peer collaboration are better equipped to adapt CLT techniques to their own classroom contexts. Continuous professional development that focuses on practical implementation has been found to significantly enhance teacher confidence and effectiveness (Wedell, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

This literature review has highlighted the complex interplay of challenges and strategies involved in implementing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach among EFL teachers in Thailand. While national education policies support communicative competence, the reality in classrooms often

reflects persistent barriers such as insufficient teacher training, oversized classes, exam-oriented curricula, and students' low confidence in speaking English. Despite these constraints, various practical strategies have emerged to empower teachers in navigating the demands of CLT. Approaches such as task-based learning, collaborative activities, scaffolding techniques, and reflective teaching practices have shown potential to enhance communicative outcomes. The use of students' first language (L1) as a supportive tool and the importance of ongoing professional development were also emphasized across the literature. In conclusion, successful CLT implementation in Thailand requires more than methodological knowledge—it demands structural support, contextual adaptation, and long-term investment in teacher development. Stakeholders, including educational policymakers, school administrators, and teacher educators, must work collaboratively to create conditions that enable meaningful, communicative, and student-centered English instruction to thrive in Thai EFL classrooms.

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