Implementing the CLT Approach in Online Instruction during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Opportunities and Challenges Encountered by Thai EFL University Lecturers

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak, Thai EFL teachers have been assigned to change their teaching platform from traditional face-to-face to online classes during lockdown periods. In light of this change, the study attempts to explore the teachers' views and their implementation of the CLT approach in online education in consideration of the fact that the approach was claimed to be the preferred approach in classroom-based instruction. Accordingly, three research instruments; namely, questionnaire, individual interview, and focus group discussion were applied to elicit information and access the teachers' viewpoints and their in-depth online teaching experiences. Thai EFL teachers perceived that communicative-based online teaching increased classroom interaction, encouraged student engagement, and promoted

student's self-directed learning. However, a number of challenges, including the lack of student attention and discipline, large class size, and technology difficulties, were revealed as the perceived barriers to implementing the CLT approach in the Thai EFL online classroom context. Overall, this study is assumed to shed light on Thai EFL teacher's communicative-oriented online teaching practices and contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of online English language teaching in Thai higher education.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Thai EFL teachers, Online Instruction, Higher Education, COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

In the increasingly globalized world, the English language is the most commonly used language among foreign language speakers (Talbot, 2024). Likewise, English is considered an important language in Thailand. Even though English in Thailand is positioned as a foreign language, the focus on teaching English is a critical requirement of the Thai education system. Similar to many countries in the world, learning English is deemed a necessity for all levels of Thai learners. The language has been taught to Thai learners for over a century and the approaches to teaching English in Thailand have continuously changed to meet the changing needs of the country's social and educational purposes. According to Sukavatee and Khlaisang (2023), the English teaching approaches and methodologies in Thailand have been progressively developed from a more passive rote-memorization method to a traditional grammar-translation, content-based instruction, and in recent times, the communicative language teaching approach. During the last two decades, the most cited teaching approaches in English language teaching and the most popular teaching approach in Thailand has been the CLT approach.

In accordance with the 1999 National Education Act, the teaching-learning process in Thailand began to focus on learner-centered instruction, lifelong learning, and technology integration in education (Wongsothorn et al., 2002). According to Jacob and Farrell (2003) and Richards (2005), the CLT is unquestionably a learner-centered approach which focuses on learners' participation and contribution in the class discussion. The key principles of the CLT approach, namely, learner-centered instruction, process-oriented teaching, interactive process among learners and lifelong learning practice, targeted the development of learner's communicative language competence. Therefore, the CLT approach, amongst others, has

been used to enhance Thai EFL students' English language proficiency and their classroom contribution. Presently, like in any other EFL contexts, the CLT approach and the extension of CLT, such as CLIL, Task-Based instruction and a Content-Based approach have been generally practiced, with mixed results, in Thailand (Sukavatee & Khlaisang, 2023; Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021).

Unexpectedly, there has been a rise of online teaching and learning since 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Many schools and universities were closed to deal with this global pandemic. Teachers and lecturers were assigned to change their teaching platform from traditional face-to-face classrooms to online classes during lockdown periods. When on-site lectures and all teaching and learning activities are forbidden, an online education becomes an alternative for students to be part of a learning community.

Based on prior research studies, the use of the CLT approach is seen as acceptable and is deemed to be a readily applicable system. Much of the research within the area has focused on the holistic view of CLT implementation in Thai classroom-based teaching (Kwon, 2017; Promtara & Suwanarak, 2018; Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021). However, there have been few attempts to explore Thai EFL teachers' views and their application of the CLT approach for online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is still a need for more empirical support to study the success of this English teaching and learning approach in Thai higher education and in the online classroom context.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Over decades, the communicative language teaching approach has gained increasing popularity and has been implemented so widely in every part of the world. The aim of this approach is the acquisition of communicative competence. According to Hymes (1972), a communicative competence was more than the implicit knowledge of the language. Competence included not only the rules of grammar but also the rules of use and social appropriacy in the context. The grammatical accuracy is as significant as the knowledge of social convention or the communicative situation. Presently, achieving communicative competence is still a goal for 21st century English classrooms (Savignon, 2017).

In the attempt to clarify the concept of communicative competence in English language teaching, Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as the relationship and integration of a system of knowledge and skill required for communication. They emphasized that

communicative competence consisted of three interconnected competences: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Then discourse competence was added to the model in 1983. The progress of every element should be taken into consideration to enhance learners' communicative competence.

Furthermore, the concepts of a CLT approach were refined into a 'weak' and a 'strong' version. The weak version emphasized the significance of providing learners opportunities to use English language for communicative purpose. The weak version was described as "learning to use English" whereas the strong version of CLT could be defined as "using English to learn it". In other words, this strong version supported the claim that English language is acquired through communication (Howatt, 1984, p.279). The CLT approach which is implemented in Thai EFL classrooms tends to be the weak version of CLT since Thai EFL teachers frequently provide opportunities for students to practice English language through assigned communicative activities.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Thailand

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced to the Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in the early 1980s through the efforts of Thailand TESOL, spearheaded by prominent educators such as Dr. Piensiri Wongwipanonda and Dr. Sam-ang Hiranburana. Their work was significantly influenced by renowned linguists like Lyle Bachman, who advocated for language teaching approaches that prioritize communicative competence.

The introduction and adoption of Communicative Language Teaching in Thailand during the 1980s and 1990s marked a significant shift in language education (Wongsothorn et al., 2002). While the approach offered promising benefits for improving communicative competence, its implementation faced substantial challenges. Continued efforts in teacher training, curriculum development, and assessment reform are essential for the sustained success of CLT in the Thai educational context.

In Thai higher education, English courses are designed for students with a focus on communication, collaboration, autonomous learning, and technology in ELT (Wongsothorn et al., 2002). The emphasis makes it imperative to provide classroom activities that are conducive to incremental development of English language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Accordingly, CLT-based teaching is considered as a significant pedagogical approach in Thai higher education. Several research studies (Komol & Suwanphathama, 2020; Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021; Pongsirijan et al., 2019) have shown that the usage of CLT approach in Thai

universities affected Thai EFL students' classroom contribution and their performance. Nevertheless, applying CLT into practice in all Thai classrooms is still challenging until the present due to some national problems and limitations (Kwon, 2017; Promtara & Suwanarak, 2018; Taladngoen, 2019).

Online Teaching and Learning

Online teaching and learning has increased rapidly since the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools and universities were required to deliver online education to the students. To practice social or physical distancing, technology has been used to overcome the pandemic challenges using online education. To support synchronous e-learning in Thailand, a number of video conferencing and collaboration software programs, including Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, are accessible to Thai EFL teachers and students. These online virtual classroom platforms allow users to share audio, video, and any other information. Additionally, these programs permit teachers to divide students into small working groups; therefore, they enable students to engage in collaborative learning (Grothaus, 2022). By the use of technology, online lessons offer flexibility, affordable tuition and academic opportunities. However, there are some drawbacks; the students have been reported as less likely to engage in collaborative learning activities and classroom interactions in an online class (Dotson et al., 2022; Sukman & Mhunkongdee, 2021; Toscu, 2023).

According to Savignon (2017), the communicative approach is not concerned with only face-to-face oral communication. The primary focus is the learner's participation in the communicative events in any given context. With the literature reviews for this current research, few studies of the CLT approach through an online context were found. Ng (2020) confirmed that English language pre-service teacher education personnel in Singapore were satisfied with CLT-based lessons in an online class. Similarly, this approach was implemented in online learning in Indonesia and a majority of the EFL teachers agreed that the CLT-based online teaching improved their students' English proficiency (Gloriez, 2022).

In consideration of the importance of the communicative-based teaching and online instruction, investigating the implementation of CLT approach in the Thai classroom context could be advantageous for both teachers and administrators in Thai higher education. It could contribute to develop a better understanding of how the CLT approach affects education when employed through online English sessions in Thai higher education. Therefore, this study was attempted to explore and analyze CLT and online learning based on the following three research questions:

1. What are Thai EFL teachers' views on the use of the CLT approach in online learning platforms?
2. What are the opportunities in the use of the communicative language teaching approach in an online English class as perceived by Thai EFL teachers?
3. What are the challenges in the use of the communicative language teaching approach in an online English class as perceived by Thai EFL teachers?

Methodology

The objective of this study is to explore the teacher participants' views towards the use of the communicative approach in an online teaching context; therefore, the constructivism philosophical paradigm has been implemented in order to understand Thai EFL teachers' reflection. Additionally, the data in this study were collected by utilizing mixed methods which involved the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative results of statistical analysis of the online questionnaires and the qualitative interview data of the individual semi-structured interview and focus group discussion are presented to examine the insights and opinions. The quantitative and qualitative results are used to re-verify the analysis and results against the other methods.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at three public universities which are all located in the Bangkok Metropolitan region. These three universities have been designated because they share similar backgrounds and educational purposes. The study participants were Thai EFL teachers working as full-time lecturers at the three public universities. Thirty Thai EFL teachers who were responsible for foundation English courses were purposively selected as the study's participants. The reason for selecting foundation English courses as the context of the study was that there is a requirement for Thai undergraduates to complete the General Education courses (Office of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, 2022). Together with the academic major, the universities introduce students to a variety of disciplines and broaden students' knowledge in General Education.

This study concentrated on a group of Thai EFL teachers who corresponded to the following criteria: 1) the teachers were responsible for a foundation English course in the second semester of the academic year 2021 (November 2021-March 2022); 2) the teachers provided synchronous online instruction by using video conferencing software platforms; 3) the teachers

applied the CLT approach in their online English courses; and 4) the teachers completed the 45-hour online English course.

Data Collection

The main study was conducted after the completion of the second semester of the academic year 2021 (November 2021-March 2022). First of all, thirty teacher participants were inquired to fill out an online questionnaire after they completed the second semester online English courses of the academic year 2021. The questionnaire questions were adapted from previous study by Rahimi and Naderi (2014). Additionally, the researchers incorporated the open-ended questions in this questionnaire to allow the teacher participants to provide detailed responses and to capture their qualitative insights. The researchers aimed to acquire insightful descriptions and some significant quotes from the participants' open-ended question responses to illustrate the key points in this study. Next, the individual semi-structured interviews were conducted during October – November, 2022. The teacher participants were equally selected from the three universities; therefore, five teachers from each university were requested to participate in the conversations. Lastly, three focus group interviews were performed in January and February, 2023.

For justification of research quality, every question in the questionnaires and interviews was reviewed and evaluated by five experts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) to ensure the content validity. The qualified items, which obtained scores equal to or greater than 0.5, were preserved; in contrast, any items which had scores lower than 0.5 were revised. Additionally, the Cronbach's Alpha (CA) was applied to test the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire. In this study, the Cronbach Alpha value of the questionnaire was reported at .785. With regard to ethical issues, the approval for the study was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), NIDA. In this study, all the participants' names, and the names of the universities where the study was carried out, were not mentioned to protect the teacher participant's confidentiality. The universities are referred to as university A, B and C, and the pseudonym initials were assigned to the teacher participants (T1, T2, T3 …); therefore, the anonymity of the teacher participants has been preserved.

Data Analyses

The quantitative data from Google form were analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics of percentage, mean, frequency, and standard deviation. The qualitative data of interview information were analyzed by a thematic

data analysis approach. In this study, thematic analysis at the explicit level was employed; the researchers interpreted the codes and patterns of the semantic content of the data. Significantly, the researchers supplemented the questionnaire data with qualitative data sets, including interviews and focus group discussions, to gain the deeper insights into participants' views and experiences of CLT application in the online classroom. Finally, the data from both quantitative and qualitative methods were triangulated together to ensure the reliability and validity of the results for the research questions and to enhance the credibility and richness of the qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Views on Online EFL Classes

With mandatory conditions and short preparation time, Thai EFL teacher's views towards the online English lesson objectives were slightly dissimilar from the normal situation. Based on the questionnaire findings, the major aims for an online English instruction in this study were to develop students' communication skills; to increase students' interest in learning English; and to promote student autonomy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Objectives for an Online English Teaching during the COVID-19 Period
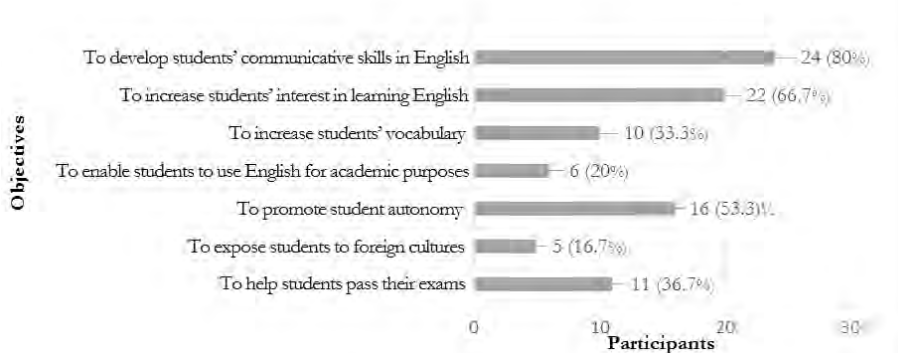
Note: This is the multiple-response question; therefore, the teacher participants can choose more than one answer. Percentages were calculated from the total number of teacher participants (n=30).

After detailed analyzing and triangulating of research findings as regards online English classes, the three distinctive dimensions which included: 1) teacher's online teaching practices, 2) students' online learnings

and 3) online classroom environments are presented in the following sub-sections.

Online teaching practices

Regardless of the teaching experiences, the teacher participants were typically new to the online education and most of them taught English classes through the online platforms for the first time. With regard to the instructional media, it was apparent that both face-to-face and online English teachings utilized similar types of learning equipment. The utilization of learning media (e.g., textbooks and the computer-based technology tools) in the online English teaching are mostly consistent with the types of learning equipment usage in general classroom-based instruction in Thailand provided by Sukavatee and Khlaisang (2023). However, compared to the onsite education, the teacher participants expressed concern about the student's accessibility to these learning media in the online settings since there was an issue of student's insufficient digital devices. The teachers questioned the efficacy of a mobile phone as a learning tool.

Furthermore, when inquiring about online teaching activities, most teacher participants preferred a whole class discussion activity when conducting synchronous online English lessons. As explained by T8:

> In online lessons, most of the activities were given for the large group. With whole-class activities, I think a teacher can take control, get students to volunteer to speak and encourage the students' participation.

While sharing and discussing the subject contents during the synchronous meeting, the teacher simply facilitated students' discussion, kept them engaged in learning and managed more brainstorming sessions to the subject contents.

Students' online learnings

As regards the student online learning, the teacher participants perceived changes in student behavior compared to traditional classroom teachings. A majority of the teacher participants agreed that many Thai EFL students were more demotivated during the online English classes. The finding is congruent with the previous study reported by Sukman and Mhunkongdee (2021). The student's lower determination to study was recognized from their lack of focus and less contributions.

In addition, the teacher participants confirmed that their students in the online classrooms typically acquired academic knowledge in a more

passive style of learning. Together with the student's passive role in the classrooms, the teachers acknowledged the student's lower level of self-confidence when engaging in online CLT activities. Interestingly, Ramsin and Mayall (2019) recognized that the level of self-confidence and self-efficacy correlated to Thai EFL student's previous online learning experiences. They revealed that the students who have experienced online education formerly were more willing to maintain their interests in online learning environment and contribute actively to online classroom activities. Therefore, the researchers were convinced that Thai EFL students' inattentiveness could be related to their limited online learning experiences.

Online classroom environments

Based on the findings, the application of both synchronous and asynchronous learning tools facilitated the online English learning. A number of online features and teaching practices were applied to maintain positive and supportive environment for online English education in Thai higher institutions. As shown in table 1 below, Thai EFL teacher participants employed various synchronous online tools while adopting the CLT approach in their teachings.

Table 1

Frequency of Use of the Synchronous Online Features in Online English Teaching

Synchronous online features	No. of Teacher Participants (*n=30*)				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
a. Schedule meetings	18	6	3	2	1
b. Video meetings	**25**	4	1	-	-
c. Live streaming	5	5	14	2	4
d. Phone calls	1	4	15	4	6
e. Screen sharing	**25**	4	1	-	-
f. Chat feature	7	12	8	3	-
g. Breakout rooms	4	4	16	3	3
h. Interactive whiteboard	-	7	15	2	6
i. Assignments and Assessment	11	9	8	1	1
j. Meeting recording	14	5	8	3	-

Predominantly, the features of 'video meetings' and 'screen sharing' were recognized as the two most significant teaching tools needed for a CLT-based online classroom. The teacher participants recognized video meetings feature as the tool to support lesson delivery, classroom communication and student's involvement. The study findings closely resemble the results

reported by Grothaus (2022) that the live video conference facilitated language teaching and reinforced online collaborative learning activities. Likewise, the teacher participants provided their views during the interviews that the screen sharing tool allowed them to share various teaching resources. The tool facilitated teachers to enhance cooperative online learning, maintain students' responsiveness and improve classroom engagement. Correspondingly, Abou-Khalil et al. (2021) revealed that the screen sharing feature efficiently contributed to the student-content engagement in the emergency online instruction.

Besides the synchronous media, the teacher participants emphasized the usefulness of asynchronous learning platforms. The asynchronous tool was generally used as the medium for teachers to exchange information, create announcements and assign homework. Furthermore, the online asynchronous platforms (e.g., Facebook discussion board and Padlet) encouraged students to develop their communication skills; the students were allowed to think deliberately, generate the ideas and discuss the subject matters with no time pressure.

Although the online learning features and materials made several positive contributions to virtual learning environment, an overwhelming majority of the teachers perceived their ineffectiveness in improving the student's feeling of inclusion. The study's findings are somehow contrary to Sirisakpanich and Suchinsak (2021) which reported that Thai EFL students' sense of community could be somewhat promoted by the use of synchronous tools in the online classroom. Based on the teacher participants' views, there was still a lack of social relationship among individuals during the online learning. The researchers were convinced that the absence of the Thai EFL student's sense of community (i.e., social presence) in the online classroom was predominantly affected by the camera-optional regulation as Yeung et al. (2023) reported the correlation of the utilization of webcam and social presence. The use of webcam enhanced the social presence, the individual's emotional expression and engagement.

Integration of CLT Approach in the Online English Classes

Based on the study findings, the teacher participants' views towards the communicative approach can be delineated into 1) communicative-based teaching; 2) student-centered teaching instruction; and 3) authenticity in language learning. These three major Thai EFL teachers' perceiving ideas resemble the theoretical explanation and characteristics of the communicative approach (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003; Richards, 2005). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the student communication was the most significant component for the communicative-based online instruction in Thailand.

Enhancing student's English speaking ability during the online learning process was perceived as the most important responsibility of Thai EFL teachers.

However, when analyzing the findings in greater detail, the researchers realized that the concepts of the communicative approach were not yet entirely recognized by Thai EFL teachers. While the views of the teacher participants focused mainly on the student's verbal communication ability and the grammatical accuracy, the theoretical proposition of the communicative approach principally emphasized the development of individual's communicative competence. Besides the ability to communicate using proper grammar, the students require the communicative competence which is the ability to understand and function language appropriately in a realistic day-to-day social communication (Savignon, 2017). The findings as regards Thai EFL teacher's inadequate understandings of the CLT concepts are not surprising as the teacher participants are scarcely educated on the in-depth notions of the communicative competence and the communicative approach.

As regards the methods to integrate the CLT approach in online instruction, the researchers analyzed information based on the responses relating to how the CLT approach is implemented in the online environment, considering the adaptability of its methods and activities to virtual classrooms. The findings were in accordance with their views towards the CLT-oriented instruction. First of all, a number of communicative activities and collaborative strategies with emphasis on improving the student's communication and language performance were highlighted. Next, besides the focused attention on the student's participation during the synchronous online meeting, the teacher participants illustrated the importance of extracurricular student-led activities (i.e., role-play and topic presentation). Lastly, a significant majority stated that they included various media from the Internet (i.e., video clips and songs) to connect their online English lessons to authentic language use and individuals' real life experiences.

Opportunities Offered by Implementing CLT in Online Instruction

A number of beneficial impacts of adopting the CLT-oriented instruction in online English classrooms emerged from the study findings. Initially, the teacher participants were all agreed that the CLT-oriented teaching enhanced the online classroom communication. There was the increasing opportunities for teachers and students to connect and interact among each other. In accordance with the prior findings of Pongsirijan et al. (2019) and Komol and Suwanphathama (2020) which concerned classroom-based instruction, applying the communicative activities and teaching

practices were improved in the student-student communication during the online English lessons. However, the study findings were somehow inconsistent with Toscu's study (2023) which reported limited student interaction in the synchronous meetings. The study presented the higher percentage of the teacher-student verbal interaction; the communication from teacher to students was noticeably more pervasive than the communication from students (whether it was between students or with a teacher) during the online English classes.

Secondly, it was apparent that the dynamic engaging online learning and the students' engagement were promoted with the utilization of communicative approach. The level of student's participation and active behavior increased to some extent with the collaborative learning resources. The researchers interpreted that Thai EFL students demonstrated a certain degree of engagement with the online English lessons, specifically in terms of both behavioral and cognitive engagement. However, the emotional engagement of students in online classrooms is under scrutiny, as the teachers reported challenges related to the students' decreased motivation, a lack of emotional connection, diminished senses of belonging, and weakened student-teacher relationships.

Thirdly, consistent with the development of learner autonomy in CLT-based in-class teaching (Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021), the teacher participants in this study perceived that the communicative assignments facilitated the student's self-directed learning in the online classrooms. The study findings revealed that with the practices of the communicative student-led activities and technology integration, the students were supported to take responsibility for their own learning. Several collaborative tasks required students to organize their work independently in out-of-class time. Some interview verbatim of the teacher participants' views on opportunities offered by implementing CLT in online instruction are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Teacher Participants' views on Opportunities Offered by Implementing CLT in Online Instruction

Theme	Interview Verbatim
To Improve online classroom communication	T3 from Focus Group A discussion: "Communicative online teaching encouraged students to share ideas and work together. The students must join the discussion to involve with the learning process."

Theme	Interview Verbatim
To Increase student engagement	T6 gave a view during the individual interview: "In my online class, I use a lot of games and interactive quiz games to increase student discussion and engagement. By using the student-oriented activities, it promoted livelier online classroom atmosphere and student participation."
To Facilitate the student's self-directed learning	Interviewee13: "Sometimes teachers assigned the after-class activities such as group work or pair work. While doing these tasks, the students somehow were responsible for their learning."
	T2 from Focus Group A discussion: "CLT activities allowed my students to improve their skills independently; for example, the students had to think of the English dialogue and practice English conversation when they were assigned the role-play assignment."

Challenges to Implementing Communicative Teaching Approach

It has been found that several teacher participants refused to teach English online for the future. Besides the apparent challenges of online teaching, the teachers' reason for denying the utilization of online instruction was the perceived barriers to implementing a CLT approach in their lessons. The teacher participants' perceived challenges were classified into three categories, including student-related, teacher-related and technology-related challenges.

Student-related challenges

The study findings revealed that several challenges which affected the CLT adoption in the online English classrooms in Thailand were mainly related to Thai EFL student characteristics. Table 3 shows the questionnaire findings regarding the student-related challenges issue on the use of the CLT approach in the online teaching.

Table 3

Student-Related Challenges

Statement	Agreement					Mean	Std. Deviation
	SA	A	N	D	SD		
Students have low-level English proficiency.	10% (3)	40% (12)	50% (15)	-	-	3.60	.675

Statement	Agreement					Mean	Std. Deviation
	SA	A	N	D	SD		
Students have a passive style of learning in online classes.	20% (6)	36.7% (11)	33.3% (10)	10% (3)	-	3.67	.922
Students are less confident when engaging in online CLT activities.	6.7% (2)	43.3% (13)	33.3% (10)	16.7% (5)	-	3.40	.855
Students have less participation in online CLT activities.	20% (6)	43.3% (13)	23.3% (7)	13.3% (4)	-	3.70	.952
Students lack motivation for developing communicative competence when learning English online.	13.3% (4)	56.7% (17)	20% (6)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)	3.70	.951
Students lack interest in cultural topics when learning English online.	10% (3)	33.3% (10)	46.7% (14)	10% (3)	-	3.43	.817
Students do not like learning English online.	6.7% (2)	33.3% (10)	40% (12)	13.3% (4)	6.7% (2)	3.20	.997

In agreement with Taladngoen (2019), the teacher participants agreed that one of the greatest constraints in implementing communicative-based instruction was Thai student's low level of English proficiency. The teachers' perceived views accord with the findings presented by Moleke and Montle (2022) which displayed that the student's English language skill was correlated with the degree of classroom participation. In parallel with the questionnaire findings, the interview results revealed that Thai student's language inability reduced the individual's participation and the efficiency of communicative learning in the online classrooms. For example, T8 responded about the students' English language proficiency during the individual interview:

> The usefulness of CLT depends on the level of students. For beginners, it is tough for them to speak and take part in classroom activities. My students having limited English proficiency deny to speak and say no to all activities in online classroom.

Interestingly, the issues of students' lack of attention and discipline were distinguishably identified as the challenges in the online English

classrooms during the interviews. The student's concentration in the online classes declined noticeably due to the absence of nonverbal interaction and several distractions. Initially, the usages of verbal and nonverbal interaction during the lessons evidently promoted the educational process and influenced the student's mood in learning. Yeung et al. (2023) identified that the nonverbal cues established the social presence and maintained the student's attention during online classes. Based on the findings, an extensive majority of the students decided to turn their camera off during the online instruction. Therefore, lacking the nonverbal cue, especially eye-contact, could result in the student's loss of concentration.

As regards the distractions, it seemed obvious that Thai EFL student's inappropriate online studying environment was generally discussed as the challenge of student's focused attention during the synchronous meetings. T3 provided an opinion during the interview that the common challenges concerning the learning environment were the study location and the noise level. The places where students studied online sometimes could be a barrier to activity participation; the unfavorable home learning environment could sometimes activate student's anxiety and lower the confidence when joining in the online classroom activities. The finding was mirrored by the study of Dotson et al. (2022) which reported that any US college students' inappropriate learning environment distracted their attention and academic engagement. Additionally, the student's multitasking behavior was considered as a distraction during online English classes. The findings revealed that several multitasking actions such as chatting with friends and surfing the internet for nonacademic purposes had a negative impact on student attentiveness and academic performance. T14 from Focus group discussion C elaborated:

> Since students are studying online with the camera off, they may do other activities while leaving the Google Meet or when another teaching program opens in new tab. Turning the camera off affects student's focus; they concentrate less on a lesson and it is easier for them to abandon their studies.

Lastly, the teacher participants reported that they encountered the student's discipline challenge when applying the communicative tasks in their online teachings. Some students refused to communicate during online lessons, or participate in the assigned in-class activities and do the extra-curricular tasks. Students provided the technological inaccessibility reason for their nonparticipation; the teacher participants recognized that some students just came up with the excuses for their inattentiveness. The teachers' perceived supposition is in accord with Nambiar' study (2020) which revealed that the student's primary reason for not attending the online class was the

concern about the technology. Nevertheless, the teachers were uncertain whether the students provided honest reasons or whether they just wanted to skip the online class; the student's excuses tended to be accompanied with a lack of determination in online learning.

Teacher-related challenges

The role of teachers is crucial in the communicative-based instruction. Therefore, Thai EFL teachers' perceived challenges as regards their teaching practices are noteworthy of mention, so that these problems can be recognized and the expectancy can be resolved in the future online English classes in Thailand. Table 4 clearly indicates the questionnaire findings concerning the possible teacher-related challenges in the use of the CLT approach in the online instruction.

Table 4

Teacher-Related Challenges

Statement	Agreement					Mean	Std. Deviation
	SA	A	N	D	SA		
You have misconceptions about CLT approach.	-	13.3% (4)	43.3% (13)	30% (9)	13.3% (4)	2.57	.898
You lack the knowledge of the appropriate use of the English language in context.	-	10% (3)	30% (9)	46.7% (14)	13.3% (4)	2.37	.850
You lack the knowledge of the English language culture.	-	3.3% (1)	40% (12)	43.3% (13)	13.3% (4)	2.33	.758
You have little time to develop teaching materials for CLT online classes.	-	33.3% (10)	40% (12)	20% (6)	6.7% (2)	3.00	.910
You have fewer resources for communicative materials development for Thai EFL students.	6.7% (2)	20% (6)	40% (12)	23.3% (7)	10% (3)	2.90	1.062

Statement	Agreement					Mean	Std. Deviation
	SA	A	N	D	SA		
You lack training about CLT approach in the context of online learning for Thai EFL students.	-	30% (9)	43.3% (13)	13.3% (4)	13.3% (4)	2.90	.995
You lack access to authentic materials for teaching English online.	-	16.7% (5)	26.7% (8)	36.7% (11)	20% (6)	2.40	1.003
You are less confident when conducting online communicative class activities.	3.3% (1)	23.3% (7)	30% (9)	33.3% (10)	10% (3)	2.77	1.040

Based on the questionnaire and interviews findings, the researchers summarized the teacher-related challenges as follows. First of all, the teachers encountered an online classroom management problem, principally due to a large number of students in the online English classrooms. The difficulties in managing the appropriate communicative tasks, ensuing the student's contribution, and organizing group works in breakout rooms, were confronted by Thai EFL teachers in the overcrowded online classrooms. Particularly for the online instruction, Taft et al. (2011) suggested that a number of variables, including type of course, level of lessons and expected learning outcomes, have to be considered before determining the appropriate number of student enrollments. Since developing Thai EFL beginner and intermediate students' communicative competence and their active participation were the intentions for an online English teaching in Thailand, the online courses should contain the right amount of students in order for them to effectively practice the interpersonal skills. The small-medium ($\leq$ 30 students) online English course was to some extent satisfactory for Thai EFL online classroom context.

Another teacher-related challenge emerging from the study was the teacher's inadequate preparation to teach the communicative approach for the online instruction. It was apparent that the majority of the teacher participants were ill-equipped for online teaching; consequently, they to a certain extent agreed that they have little time to develop proper teaching materials for communicative online classrooms.

Lastly, the findings revealed that Thai EFL teachers had limited knowledge of the CLT implementation in the online instruction. The teacher participants perceived that they could manage the communicative-based online class more efficiently if they have been well-trained on the CLT

application and teaching strategies in the context of online teaching for Thai EFL undergraduates. For example, T13 from Focus group discussion C provided a view:

> I think that university should conduct a training session which give teachers more understanding about the synchronous teaching program and its features. As a senior teacher, I struggled with the content delivery and the collaborative activities management for students in an online class.

The study's findings regarding the importance of the proper training is consistent with the previous study by Kwon (2017) which reported that the appropriate CLT training program had a positive influence on a Thai teacher's CLT teaching practices.

Technology-related challenges

Thai EFL teachers encountered several technological problems when managing the communicative online English classrooms. Table 5 on the next page presents the teacher participants' levels of agreement with four suggested technology-related challenges on the use of the CLT approach in their online teaching.

Table 5

Technology-Related Challenges

Statement	Agreement					Mean	Std. Deviation
	SA	A	N	D	SD		
Classes are too large for the effective use of CLT in online platforms.	30% (9)	40% (12)	30% (9)	-	-	4.00	.788
The online tools do not support the interaction of students in the English lesson.	10% (3)	40% (12)	36.7% (11)	13.3% (4)	-	3.47	.860
The online tools do not support communicative activities in the English lesson.	10% (3)	36.7% (11)	40% (12)	6.7% (2)	6.7% (2)	3.37	.999
There are technological difficulties in implementing the CLT approach into English courses online.	10% (3)	50% (15)	36.7% (11)	-	3.3% (1)	3.63	.809

Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the issues of internet connection, electronic devices and digital literacy were apparently the common technology-related challenges to employing communicative-based online instruction. With the emphasis on the technological challenges to the CLT application, the findings in the study corroborates with Gloriez's (2022) conclusion which recognized that digital inaccessibility and limited internet access caused difficulties for English teachers to implement the CLT teaching in the online lessons.

Support Needed for CLT Integration into English Online Classrooms

In addition to resolving the above-presented challenges, several teacher participants' suggestions emerged from the study findings. For the efficient communicative-based teaching in in the future, particular supports (i.e., the improvement of teacher preparation and management, appropriate online curriculum and technology accessibility) were recommended by Thai EFL teacher participants. First, the well-prepared teacher could provide interesting communicative online activities and enhance the optimistic online classroom community. As regards the appropriate online curriculum, the reduction of class size and restructuring the assessment system were proposed by a great number of teacher participants in the study. Regardless of the offline or online methods of teaching, the teachers believed that a suitable curriculum for communicative-oriented instruction was required in the Thai EFL education system. Lastly, it seemed noticeable that the technological problems to some extent contributed to unproductive CLT implementation. Therefore, the technology support from the university could enhance the overall teaching and learning performances.

Implications of the study

The present study sheds light on Thai EFL teachers' communicative-oriented online teaching practices and contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the field of online English language teaching in Thai higher education. Regarding the pedagogical implications, the findings can principally contribute to the understanding of Thai EFL teachers and tertiary educational institutions. First of all, it raises the English teachers' understanding and awareness as regards communicative-based online lessons. Secondly, the findings emphasize the implementation of technologies (i.e., synchronous and asynchronous online tools) into the academic process. The acquaintance with technology integration and digital literacy would be a great help to prepare teachers for more future uses of online education. Lastly, since the study revealed constraints in applying the CLT approach at the Thai

tertiary level, the educational administration should recognize the causes of communicative-based online teaching struggles. Consequently, the authorities are presumed to provide the identified necessary support (i.e., online curricular adaptation and CLT training courses) to facilitate the online communicative teaching in the future.

Conclusion

This study revealed Thai EFL teachers' collective viewpoints towards the implementation of the CLT approach, followed by the perceived usefulness, the perceived challenges and the suggestions for effective online communicative-based education offered in Thai higher institutions in the future. The study findings aimed principally to contribute to the Thai EFL teachers and tertiary educational institutions.

There are a few limitations to this study. Given the fact that the study was conducted at three public universities; the findings cannot be generalized to all higher education institutions in Thailand. Next, due to the social distancing compliance and the teacher participant comfort, the researchers carried out every interview by utilizing synchronous video communication. Potential limitation of conducting interviews through the risks technological disruptions or connectivity issues, which may compromise the quality of the interview data and hinder the depth of the participant responses. Lastly, since focus was on the teacher participants' views towards the forced and emergency online teaching offered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, their opinions regarding communicative online classes might change in the course of time. This may make it harder to generalize findings across a broader population. The unique circumstance and varied responses of individuals may limit the applicability of research outcomes to a more heterogeneous educational context.

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