

## **Practical Knowledge Growth in Communicative Language Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is promoted in teacher education programmes around the world, although the appropriateness of this methodology in contexts outside the English-speaking West has been questioned, often from a theoretical perspective. In fact, very little empirical research has been conducted into the practical knowledge of CLT of non-native speaker teachers of English, and there is a lack of such research investigating growth longitudinally in this area. Using observations, interviews, and reflective writing, this study charts the practical knowledge growth in CLT of a lower secondary teacher in the Middle East while she was studying part-time on an in-service BA (TESOL) programme run by the University of Leeds in conjunction with the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman. Qualitative data suggests that the teacher's practical knowledge of CLT developed considerably during the course. Further research into the influence of teacher education programmes in TESOL on practical knowledge is called for.

### **Introduction – Practical Knowledge Growth in Communicative Language Teaching**

As Nunan (1987) writes: “While a great deal has been written on the theory and practice of communicative language teaching (CLT), there have been comparatively few studies of actual communicative language practices” (p. 136). This is still true, particularly in contexts outside English-speaking Western ELT where the voices of non-native speaker teachers are too often unheard. This is unfortunate as, in the absence of research evidence as to the cognitions and behaviour of such practitioners, the designers of teacher education programmes are left with assumptions that may be erroneous.

In this paper, I report on the developing “practical knowledge” (Elbaz, 1981) of a non-native speaker teacher of English over a three-year period in a hitherto little-researched context. During this time, she was studying for an in-service university degree in TESOL. My focus is on her design and use of communicative tasks (Cameron, 2001) to develop speaking skills.

After discussing relevant concepts in more detail, I explore the research context, outline the research methodology, present findings, and then discuss these findings in relation to the literature.

### **Research into Practical Knowledge Growth in CLT**

I am investigating “practical knowledge” (Elbaz, 1981), as “much of what teachers know originates in practice and is used to make sense of and deal with practical problems” (Borg, 2006, p. 13). To varying extents and in different ways, practical knowledge is influenced by formal knowledge. It is also personal, tacit, systematic, and dynamic, continually shaped and refined as a result of professional and educational experiences throughout teachers’ lives (Borg, 2006). If a teacher’s practical knowledge (PK) in any particular area, such as in CLT methodology, can be described as “well-developed,” a reading of the literature (e.g., Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood & Son, 2004, 2005, 2007) would suggest we may look for a number of indicators. First, internal consistency is likely to characterize the teacher’s reported beliefs about teaching and learning. Second, the reported beliefs are likely to draw upon public as well as personal theory. Third, and perhaps most crucially, there is likely to be a synergy between reported beliefs and classroom practices.

In the field of CLT, the third of these three considerations has driven much of the research, as Mangubhai et al. (2007) suggest, in referring to a number of studies conducted since the 1980s that have concluded that CLT is rarely used effectively in classrooms, with traditional practices tending to predominate. The same authors provide a number of possible reasons to explain these findings that run counter, to some extent, to the conclusions of their own research (Mangubhai et al., 2004, 2005). First, they draw attention to conceptual ambiguity regarding the term CLT, which “has always meant a multitude of different things to different people” (Harmer, 2003, p. 289). Reported beliefs, they indicate, may therefore be expressed with the help of ambiguous terms, which cloud understanding. Second, they point out: “teachers probably use a mixture of CLT and non-CLT features in what they call a CLT approach” (Mangubhai et al., 2007, para. 8). So, the presence of CLT features may be missed, while non-CLT features may make more of an impression on the observer. Third, the same authors refer to the only partial acceptance of CLT in some Asian contexts, as it is perceived as culturally inappropriate in different ways; for example, for teachers in Vietnam to take on a facilitative role (Pham, 2005). This may limit implementation, as may a further possible factor, because, fourth, these writers suggest “teachers have not been given the necessary tools for using CLT by teacher educators” (Mangubhai et al., 2007, para. 7). In addition to disseminating information, I would include under providing “tools,” supporting the development of relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

These four issues can be addressed in various ways by in-service teacher education programmes with a view to helping teachers develop PK and achieve a synergy between beliefs and practices with regard to CLT. First, course input can highlight “core” CLT features, such as those listed by Richards (2005), including, for example, the need to encourage meaningful learner-centred interaction. Second, if a constructivist approach to

teacher education (Dangel & Guyton, 2004) is adopted, then the context of the in-service teachers can be considered deeply, with internally-consistent input tailored to their needs. Furthermore, opportunities for engagement and reflection through practical activities, such as microteaching with feedback, task design and materials' evaluation, can be built into sessions. It is my contention that such activities can overcome the challenges identified by Mangubhai et al. (2007) (and discussed above), and so stimulate growth in PK with regard to CLT methodology.

In this article, I investigate PK *growth* in CLT: growth has not been the subject of recent studies in the topic area. Thus, while Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) and Mangubhai et al. (2004) used observations and interviews in tandem to look for synergy between reported beliefs and actual CLT practices, they did not look at change longitudinally, nor seek to influence it. In contrast, Nunan (1987) and Kumaravadivelu (1993) intervened to advise teachers to use CLT practices more effectively. Thus, Nunan encouraged a teacher to use "referential" questions when addressing his class, while Kumaravadivelu briefed a teacher on the use of "macrostrategies," such as creating learning opportunities and facilitating negotiated interaction between participants. In both cases, the interventions successfully influenced practice, in the short-term. We are not told, though, about the teachers' cognitions. As Mangubhai et al. (2007) remind us, only recently has teachers' cognition been considered in this line of inquiry. In this research, I investigate how an English teacher developed PK in CLT longitudinally while studying on a three-year course.

### **Background: An In-Service Teacher Education Programme Incorporating CLT**

CLT was introduced in the first module of an in-service BA (TESOL) Programme created by the University of Leeds for the local Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman. Diploma-holding teachers of English on the three-year course studied intensively during summer and winter terms, and then attended day release throughout the rest of the year, when they had an opportunity to put ideas picked up on the course into practice, as they were teaching on the other days. Once a semester, they were observed in their schools by a regional tutor, who used feedback sessions to help them relate theory to practice. This teaching practice was not assessed.

According to Richards and Rixon (2002, p. 5), who evaluated the project, the curriculum of the degree represented "a state-of-the-art coverage of the field of TESOL." The first methodology module, TEYL, introduced CLT, the importance of context and meaning in language learning (Donaldson, 1978), and the characteristics of children as learners (Halliwell, 1992). The practical assignment through which the module was assessed involved designing a communicative activity and trying it out in the classroom, before evaluating it.

This led into a second methodology module, when Cameron's (2001) communicative task (including preparation, core and follow-up elements) was introduced. Ideally, the "core" communicative activity of an oral task would create a desire and purpose for communication, allow for a focus on meaning rather than form and for freedom in choice of language. Private,

spontaneous speech would be encouraged through the inclusion of closed pairwork and groupwork.

For their assignment, teachers were asked to design a communicative task appropriate for their learners, perhaps through adapting their coursebook. They needed to identify demands their core communicative element placed upon learners and plan how to support these in a Vygotskian way (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Through modifying their task until it was of a suitable challenge level, they might help learners achieve task outcomes, developing as language users in the process (Cameron, 2001).

Further modules in the second and third year of the programme revisited communicative tasks in the light of fresh input: on teaching speaking and listening, teaching grammar and vocabulary, designing materials. The communicative task was thus a thread that ran through the programme.

### **Research Methodology**

I am interested in how the teacher education programme described above influenced growth in a teacher's PK, specifically with regard to CLT. Accordingly, my research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent did a teacher's practical knowledge (PK) in using CLT methodology develop while she was engaged on a three-year BA (TESOL) programme?
2. How did the course, which seemed based on constructivist principles (Dangel & Guyton, 2004), appear to help her?

In addressing these questions, I draw upon various criteria. I will explore the relationship between the teacher's reported beliefs and observed classroom practices, the internal consistency of her reported cognitions, the extent to which these cognitions appeared influenced by public theory, the cultural appropriateness of her classroom practices, and the mix of CLT and non-CLT elements in her work.

The research was part of a larger case study (Wyatt, 2008), which examined the development of five teachers throughout their three-year course. More specifically, I explored PK growth in relation to different topics that emerged in the individual cases, relating to different aspects of English language teaching methodology (for example, one case study focused on developing reading skills, another on using groupwork). Returning to the CLT focus, this developed as it coincided with the interests of one of the teachers. Sarah (a pseudonym) expressed a strong interest in CLT in early interviews, an interest which was maintained throughout, up until and including her submission of her dissertation (the final piece of assessed work on the course). For this major assignment, she chose to focus, with the help of action research methodology, on her design and classroom use of communicative tasks. As CLT became central to her development, so it also became central to my case study charting growth in her PK.

The research was conducted according to strict ethical guidelines. The five teachers who took part were volunteers who signed informed consent forms. These promised anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time (Wyatt, 2008), though none chose to do so. I consider that by aligning my research interests with those of the teachers in my study, I improved the study's ecological validity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) as interviews focused on the teachers' professional interests. This seemed important, as "teacher-researchers are teachers first," nurturing the wellbeing of others while seeking knowledge and understanding (Mohr, 2001, p. 9). Given this bond, I resolved that my students would be portrayed sympathetically, as would their culture (Wyatt, 2008). Early draft versions of their individual case studies were sent to the five teachers for their comments, and follow-up interviews were conducted as part of the "member checking" process I followed on Stake's (1995) recommendation.

This brings me to other features of the research design, and an acknowledgement that, in conducting the research, I was an ideologically committed insider, intimately involved, as a teacher educator, in developing the qualities I was investigating. This links my research to critical theory (Cohen et al., 2000), and to Holliday's (2002) progressive qualitative paradigm. However, this work can also be seen as interpretive case study research, as I was evaluating the influence on an individual's growth of a major project, in which my own role, as an "agent of change" (Kennedy, 1996), was relatively minor: as a regional tutor on the project described above, I played a supportive role, working with a group of 35 teachers intensively throughout their three-year course.

Other features of the research design are its longitudinal, qualitative nature. In the language teacher education literature, longitudinal research of the panel study variety, which involves tracking the same participant(s) over time (Cohen et al., 2000), is rare as it can be difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, such research can be valuable. Through making use of prolonged engagement and persistent observation, qualities that may lead to more credible research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), panel studies can identify patterns of development (Cohen et al., 2000). I was fortunate in that the context I was working in invited me to track the teacher's development over three years, while she was on the course.

The outcome was a qualitative case study, which aimed to be strong on reality (Stake, 2000), offering a rich, vivid description of events blended with analysis, focusing on the individual and seeking to understand her perspectives (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). I hoped to facilitate a vicarious experience and provide a sufficiently clear picture of the phenomenon being studied to allow the reader to function as a co-analyst (Borg, 1997). If qualitative research is able to do this, credibility and confirmability, criteria for trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), can be enhanced.

My primary means of collecting data was through the qualitative semi-structured interview, which, as Kvale (1996, p. 42), outlining the postmodernist view, puts it: "is a construction site of knowledge." When viewing the interview from this perspective, the interviewer is an active participant seeking to achieve "negotiated accomplishments ... that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 663). Quality criteria for

the interview, dependent on how well the interviewer establishes a good rapport, listens carefully and comments thoughtfully (Borg, 2006), might include “the extent of spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from the interviewee,” and their relative expansiveness after focused follow up questions. Ideally, what the interviewee says will have been interpreted and verified as far as possible during the interview process itself (Kvale, 1996, p. 145).

To complement and contrast the data gathered through interviews, I drew upon direct observational data, gained chiefly in the natural settings of classrooms, in which my role was as a “non-participant observer” (Cohen et al., 2000). A major advantage of observations, as Robson (2002) argues, is that they provide direct access to real life, although there is a danger of reactivity in certain circumstances, if, for example, the teacher, trying to please the researcher, exhibits behaviour that she thinks he wants to see (Borg, 2006). This is a reason for explaining the purpose of the observation carefully, as I tried to do.

Observations are often used together with interviews to collect descriptions of teaching to compare to cognitions elicited beforehand or subsequently when the rationale behind the observed practices can be explored (Borg, 2006). In practice, I combined these methods through “unstructured lesson observations” (Cohen et al., 2000), followed by interviews that started with a post-lesson discussion. In this phase of the interview, I used a version of the “stimulated recall” technique discussed by Bailey & Nunan (1996), with my notes however, rather than video, used to prompt the teacher’s interpretations of events. The interview then continued into a semi-structured phase, with topics identified prior to the interview explored at this time through the technique of top-down hierarchical focusing (Tomlinson, 1989). So, topics were covered through general and then more detailed questions, but not in any set order to allow the interview to flow.

Besides these methods, I also analysed assignments (including her final assignment—the dissertation) produced by the teacher as part of her course. These assignments can be seen as a form of reflective writing (Borg, 2006), in that they included reflections, although they need to be treated cautiously, as they were written with a view to pleasing a discourse community of markers. I also conducted several interviews not preceded by observations.

My procedures when collecting observational and interview data together were as follows: during lessons, I kept an open narrative record, jotting down descriptive notes, relating to actions and reactions, movement, words spoken by teacher and learners, and written on the whiteboard, this commentary punctuated occasionally by exclamations and questions to remind me of key incidents later. Post-observation discussions were held immediately afterwards in the quietest room we could find and recorded on micro-cassette with the teacher’s permission. I elicited feelings about the lesson, memories, reactions, highlighting key incidents and inviting reflection on them, teasing out evidence, encouraging links to public theory and summarizing. While we talked, I added to observation notes, in different coloured ink, as exclamations and questions were dealt with. Next, I had prepared questions relating specifically to my research to ask, these generally having arisen from data analysis,

reading since the last interview, theorizing and reflection. I approached this semi-structured phase flexibly, in terms of the order in which questions were asked and the way in which topic areas were explored through follow-up questions. Later, I listened to the full interview on audiotape, making notes while I did so.

My analytical procedures were “interactive” and “iterative” (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997), with the data reviewed many times. After each round of data collection, I re-read observation notes and notes made while listening to audio-recordings of interviews in the light of prior objectives. I also transcribed increasingly larger segments of interviews to help me use the data to ‘think with’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) and to allow the data in due course “in all its richness, breadth and depth” to be the star (Chenail, 1995, para. 10). Relating these segments to research questions, I adopted the “template approach” (Robson, 2002) to data analysis, creating a matrix to facilitate the move from coding to interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

I now provide a narrative account of the teacher’s experiences, before addressing my research questions. In constructing this account, I use “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), aiming to allow readers to “extend their memories of happenings” (Stake, 2000, p. 442), derive expectations from tacit knowledge (Kvale, 1996) and draw their own conclusions (Stake, 2000). While writing I triangulate, by juxtaposing reported thoughts (elicited through interviews) with observed actions, with a view to adding depth to the picture being painted, providing the “possibility of additional interpretations” (Stake, 1995), and so enhancing the study’s credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data referred to are coded as follows (after Borg, 1998):

**Table 1. Data Coding**

Teacher’s pseudonym	Source of data	Number
Sarah – S	Assignment – A	1-7
	Interview – I	
	Observation – O	

Thus, SO.3 was Sarah’s third observation. I draw on data from seven interviews, seven assignments (including her dissertation), and three observations.

### **Introducing the Teacher**

Sarah, the senior English teacher of a girls’ lower secondary school, had been teaching for twelve years when I met her in December 2002 at the start of the course. All her teaching had been with the same curriculum (which was being phased out) in the same school. When I met her, she reported she knew “nothing” about communicative tasks or CLT (SI.7). Yet, she quickly developed a powerful belief in the value of this methodology, specifically to develop speaking skills, as shown by this excerpt:

I think it's better to use this method, you know, and I think the children they must talk, you know they are Grade 9, they have to talk in English, they have to express their ideas... the problem here is that our children don't have a chance to speak in English, most of the time the teacher has to speak (SI.1).

Sarah emphasised the powerful impact that CLT methodology, introduced in the first module, TEYL, made on her cognition. After learning about children's capacity for indirect learning, their imagination, their instincts for play, fun, interaction and talk, creative use of limited language resources, and ability to grasp meaning from the world around them (Halliwell, 1992), Sarah complained that the curriculum she used "never considered" these characteristics. She was impressed by Donaldson's (1978) version of Piaget's famous experiment into perceptions of sameness, and was influenced by various authors, claiming in her first (March 2003) assignment that children have an instinct for meaning (Moon, 2000), a desire to communicate (Harmer, 2001), and learn if they have a real purpose (Donaldson, 1978). They need meaningful topics (Williams, 1998) and varied activities (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) that appeal to their sense of fun (Halliwell, 1992) (SA.1).

Sarah reflected on a memory from childhood. She recalled being attracted, as a young girl, by the easy informal talk in English, which she was learning at school, of foreign guests her father had invited to the house. She wanted "to share with them," to understand, but she listened and found she could not understand, and when she opened her mouth to speak she found she had no words (SI.2).

She first told me about this experience in November 2003, and then referred to it over the next two years. She recalled the frustration of wondering what was the use of learning English if she could not use it to speak. She thought back to school. "I remember the way that I learned English, without interest," she wrote in March 2003. "We focused on the new words and phrases, and the teacher asked us to memorize the language without understanding why we were doing this." There had been "a focus on grammar rules... a focus on passing exams" (SA.1). She was never encouraged to use the language to talk about herself, her feelings, her likes and dislikes; the reason, she concluded, why she could not use English to communicate with native speakers in her own house as a young girl (SI.5).

Sarah felt her teaching prior to the course had been influenced by the approaches she had been exposed to as a learner. She had seen herself as an instructor, there "to talk a lot" with the children there only to "receive." She had expected learners to understand grammar rules immediately. Now, though, in the first year of the BA programme, influenced by fresh input, she was more tolerant, accepting mistakes "not like before," and trying to encourage learners to do more talking in the class than she did, to "express their ideas," to say what they felt. If the grammar was wrong, she thought "OK," maybe "after one week or after one unit" they would get it (SI.2). By the second year of the programme, she described her role as that of "a guide and catalyst for classroom communication," encouraging the use of English while she monitored, but not intervening. She argued, quoting Willis (1996), that correcting learners' mistakes each time would not help them develop their speaking because it would not change

the order in which linguistic features began to occur accurately in the spontaneous speech they produced (SA.3).

To recap, Sarah's ideas about language learning and her own role in supporting this were changing rapidly. The BA Programme helped her rediscover her beliefs and offered new and exciting methodological options. Initially, though, this led to tensions between beliefs and practice, as I now explain.

### **Tensions Between Beliefs and Practice**

Sarah expressed a powerful drive to use CLT methodology, reporting in the first interview (October 2003) that she was "trying to change everything." She criticized the coursebook, describing it as "limited." When I look at it, she continued:

I find, you know, for example, the pairwork or the core activity – all the information is there. They have the question and they have the answer at the same time, and this is not useful for learners. There must be an information gap (SI.1).

Encouraged by this, I was looking forward to seeing learners interacting meaningfully with each other in her lessons. However, in the first two I observed, in October 2003 and March 2004, there was no evidence of meaningful interaction. Whole class interaction was the predominant mode, with the teacher at the centre. In this respect, therefore, there was a lack of synergy between beliefs and practice.

However, while these lessons were not very "communicative" in a Western sense, they were distinguished in various ways; by her use of probing questions that encouraged reasoning, careful listening and adjusting of input according to the learners' needs, provision of contextually appropriate examples of the language, and consideration for learners' feelings in terms of error correction. Some of these aspects of methodology, which I would relate broadly to CLT, were features she identified as new in her teaching.

In the first of these lessons, for example, to contextualize language needed for a new unit on places, Sarah produced two large photographs, one of an area of Muscat and the other of a mountain village. A lot of questioning of the whole class followed. *Where was the village? In the mountains, yes, perhaps in Rustaq, yes. How did they know the second photograph was of Muscat? Shops? Yes, but there are shops in Sohar. Forts, yes, His Majesty's palace, yes, it was visible in the picture. Differences between the city and the village were elicited. Yes, there is a school, maybe there are many schools, houses, yes, what about their size? What are they made of? Mud, in the mountains, yes, sometimes. Hospitals, clinics, electricity, hotels, roads, transport, what kinds of ... donkeys in the mountains, yes, maybe.* There were a lot of questions and follow-up questions, building on learners' utterances, getting the students to think and develop their powers of expression in the second language (SO.1). Sarah reported she had not taught the lesson that way in previous years: "Before I didn't have any idea how to create a context, any context, how to make it clear, how to start the unit." She had not used

the photos, but instead, had followed the book. “Only you have to do the task, the children have to write, and that’s it” (SI.1).

Sarah’s gentler error-correction was also new. For an assignment she was working on from September 2003 (for a module on language acquisition and learning), Sarah gave students from different classes a questionnaire. One section of this elicited their views of English (Did they like it or not?) and the reasons they ascribed to this. When Sarah analysed the results, she found that some of the reasons mentioned for not liking English were related to the teacher’s behaviour: “She always shouts at them, embarrasses them.” After discovering this, she was trying harder to create “a supportive environment inside the class by changing ... the atmosphere... the treatment,” changing her way of dealing with them, trying to make herself “more friendly to them” (SI.2).

Sarah was using methodology more compatible with CLT. However, she also wanted to use communicative tasks. “Sometimes I make core activities for students,” she told me, talking about adapting and making new, but she also admitted: “I know it’s hard for me also, very hard for me and I have to use a lot of papers and everything, but when I did this with my class, I feel they are really happy, they like English, not like before” (SI.1).

So creating core activities seemed worthwhile, but time-consuming. There were various other difficulties. Although, when planning communicative tasks, she thought carefully about demands and support now, she considered it very challenging, she reported, “to adapt an activity to find the communicative purpose, to find the meaningful context, and to apply this in the school. It is difficult. Maybe in theory it is OK, but in practice to do this is very hard” (SI.2).

In addition to this cognitive challenge, there were practical issues of classroom management to contend with. In order to involve the students in communicative interaction, they needed to be physically working together, which was difficult. “I have 45 girls in the class,” she explained, “and to arrange the seating and to arrange the materials that I’m going to use is difficult, but I’m trying, I’m trying to use it” (SI.2).

To summarize, there were tensions between Sarah’s beliefs and practices. The course had activated powerful beliefs that were forcing her to reinvent herself as a teacher. This was challenging as she needed to take on different roles, organize the learners in different ways and supplement the coursebook she was using with core communicative activities that required planning skills as well as skills in materials design. To succeed, her practical knowledge needed to develop in each area.

### **Trying to Resolve These Tensions**

The BA programme helped Sarah as she tried to resolve these tensions. Her practical knowledge in CLT, and specifically in using communicative tasks, grew through her engagement with practical assignments as well as classroom experiences. There were various

dimensions to this growth that evidence from various sources can shed light on. First, I turn to her assignments to show how her conceptual understanding of communicative tasks and planning skills developed.

### *Developing Conceptual Understanding and Planning Skills*

Sarah's ideas about communicative tasks were initially simple, focusing on the key concepts of information gap and communicative purpose. Thus, the core activity for her Tasks assignment (October 2003) was based on a Grade 7 unit of the coursebook that contained exercises on the location of places: asking after and describing. In the coursebook, there was no information gap, so she supplied one: Pupil A asked, "Excuse me. Where is the clinic?", while looking at the simplified map of a town, and instructed to ask about the clinic, not marked on the version of the map she had. Pupil B, looking at a slightly different version of the same map, would answer: "It is on Suq Road. It is next to the fort." Pupil A then replied, "Thank you very much," before sketching the building on her map, hopefully in the right place. Then Pupil B would ask: "Excuse me. Where is the boy's school?" The learners would take turns, asking about two buildings each (SA.2).

Compare this to the communicative task Sarah designed for the Materials Design and Development assignment (November 2005). I summarize the preparation and core activities, in Table 2, together with materials used.

**Table 2. Preparation and Core Activities**

<i>Step</i>	<i>Materials</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Preparation 1	Picture cut from a magazine, showing a kitchen with food. Food items are masked with stickers.	T (teacher) shows picture.  In pairs, learners guess the food behind the stickers.  T asks questions whole class; e.g., <i>Are there any eggs? Is there a bag of sugar?</i>  T removes the stickers and learners check.  New vocabulary items are explained.
Preparation 2	Worksheet from the coursebook – a gap-fill exercise	Learners focus on grammar, producing 8 sentences after looking at a picture, and the choices <i>a lot of, some, and any</i> . For example, <i>There is <u>some</u> water in the bottle.</i>  T checks, eliciting reasons for choices.

Table 2. Continued

<p>Preparation 3</p>	<p>Tape recording of a dialogue, made by Sarah and a friend (excerpt below):</p> <p><i>(Phone rings)</i></p> <p>M (mother): Yes, Darling. What's happening?</p> <p>D (daughter): Mummy. My friends will come tomorrow?</p> <p>M: Yah.</p> <p>D: I want to make fish curry for them.</p> <p>M: Yes, that's a delicious dish.</p> <p>D: Are there any onions in the kitchen?</p> <p>M: Yes, we have a lot of them.</p>	<p>Learners listen to discover who the speakers are, what they are doing and talking about.</p> <p>Learners check answers in pairs, before whole class feedback.</p> <p>T asks, <i>Has a similar situation ever happened to you, and if so, what do you remember?</i> inviting reflection on personal experience.</p> <p>Learners listen again to identify expressions used for opening and closing the conversation, and any other useful expressions.</p>
<p>Core activity</p>	<p>Role cards for Pupil A and Pupil B.</p> <p>Pupil A has a shopping list and Pupil B has a photo of a kitchen.</p>	<p>T explains situation. Pupil B is the mother in the kitchen. Pupil A is her daughter, out shopping with her father, when she remembers she has invited friends to the house and wants to prepare an orange cake for them.</p> <p>T distributes role cards and explains:</p> <p>Pupil A should ask about food items on the shopping list and put a tick if the food is in the kitchen, a cross if it is not.</p> <p>Pupil B has to look carefully at the photo, try to give correct information, and ask questions to check if Pupil A has enough; e.g., <i>How many eggs do you want?</i></p> <p>T reminds learners to use some interaction strategies.</p> <p>Learners engage in back-to-back pairwork, imagining they are talking on the phone (SA.6).</p>

There is clear evidence of growth, as a step-by-step analysis reveals. Justifying the design, Sarah explained she would start with a colourful magazine picture, as this might be motivating in its authenticity. Getting the learners to predict would “expand their language” and encourage imagination, before a focus on grammatical forms would continue to activate language knowledge. Then there was the listening text, which might help her class “bridge the gap between classroom knowledge” and the real world, as it contained “some typical features of authentic spoken text, such as ellipsis, deixis, repetition” and expressions used for managing a discourse. They would listen for gist and reflect on personal experience. The context provided of shopping, kitchens, and preparing dishes for friends would be familiar to the girls, considering their age and culture, and this factor, together with the introduction of interaction strategies, might encourage them to speak. The role cards designed for Pupils A & B would create an information gap, and their pairwork, back-to-back to simulate a telephone conversation, would involve communicative purpose as the daughter tried to identify what she needed to buy (SA.6).

This November 2005 communicative task was clearly more complex than the one Sarah had designed just over two years earlier (described above it). During this time, she assimilated concepts from different modules and seemed to pass through stages as a task designer. By October 2003, she could create an information gap for the Tasks assignment. This had been beyond her a few months earlier (March 2003), when a communicative activity she designed introduced a game but no gap. A May 2004 communicative task (for the Teaching Speaking and Listening module) was then more fully developed, creating a clearer context, giving learners control over the language they used, activating receptive skills and explicitly supporting interaction strategies in the setting up. Her November 2005 communicative task (described above) represented a further development along these lines. However, for this she created a more realistic context still, dealt more carefully with learners’ authentic communicative needs, and provided materials that involved more speaking practice.

In conceptualizing and planning communicative tasks, Sarah’s practical knowledge grew throughout the research period. Was there also growth in her ability to make practical use of communicative tasks in the classroom? For this, I turn to evidence from observations.

#### *Making Practical Use Of Communicative Tasks*

In April 2005, I observed Sarah use a communicative task with one of her classes. This lesson was very different (in terms of CLT practices) from those observed in October 2003 and March 2004 (discussed above). The lesson included three “reasoning gap” activities (Parrott, 1993), such as the following, used for preparation: Sarah held up a flashcard, which showed a sketch of a girl’s face (perhaps she was a teenage girl and she was crying—the eyes had been coloured in red, and there was a touch of blue about them, and tears), and put it on the whiteboard. “She had red and watery eyes. Why? Discuss in groups.” First, one group got quite animated, and then the others, as girls searched for ideas and means of expression. Sarah asked each group to present a possible reason to the class. “She had red and watery eyes because she was ill,” one group said. “She had red and watery eyes because she was sick ...

because she was tired ... because she was late for school” were other answers. One group suggested, “She had red and watery eyes because she didn’t buy a beautiful dress,” while another said: “She had red and watery eyes because her father died” (SO.3).

Sarah then asked the girls to imagine they had been absent from school the day before, and to think of a reason. They should do this individually. She invited a girl to come to the front, greeted her informally and inquired, “Did you come to school yesterday?” “Why were you absent?” She turned to the rest of the class, “What questions did I ask her?” She wrote a skeleton of these questions and the answers she had received on the board (‘Did you ...?’ ‘No, I ...’ ‘Why ...?’ ‘Because ...’), and elicited possible greetings for such a situation. A pair came forward to demonstrate the teacher-student role-play, and giggled through it, initially both wanting to be the teacher (SO.3).

Sarah then set up a closed pairwork activity, telling each pair to choose a situation from a list of missed events written on the board; *eat your breakfast, do your homework, sleep early, visit Rustaq Fort*. Their choice would form the topic of their conversation. After the pairs had chosen, one girl had to think of a reason, while the other thought of conversational openings, and they did so with the teacher monitoring (SO.3).

When they were ready (Sarah had just told several pairs not to start the main speaking activity yet), the role-play was demonstrated at the front of the class through open pairs: “Did you go to Rustaq Fort yesterday?” asked one girl, after greeting her friend. “No, I didn’t.” “Why not?” “Because the bus was punctured.” The learners worked in closed pairs, and there was a busy hubbub around the room. They then switched roles to get more practice, and most appeared to be very much on-task, obviously enjoying the freedom to express themselves (SO.3).

Sarah gave feedback and then focused on a matching exercise with pictures and phrases, for consolidation from the coursebook. The students formed sentences, for example, “She didn’t eat an orange because she wasn’t hungry.” Some struggled, but they checked their ideas quickly in pairs, before Sarah elicited answers whole class (SO.3).

From my perspective as a teacher educator, there were positive things about this lesson. The students had opportunities to reason in pairs and groups cooperatively and exchange information. The lesson seemed motivating, with plenty of variety in the modes of interaction used; groupwork, individual work, whole class instruction, as well as open and closed pairwork. Time was devoted to providing meaningful interaction opportunities for all, while Sarah monitored, supporting. Creativity in language use was encouraged, but there was also a focus on form and a brainstorming of interaction strategies (SO.3).

Observing this April 2005 lesson, I realized that Sarah could use CLT methodology in an interactive, learner-centred way, and make practical use of communicative tasks, even with a large class. The fluent way in which she managed the lesson, moving smoothly from one activity to another, varying interaction mode and focus, suggested she had developed

confidence with this methodology. Her practical knowledge had accommodated aspects of CLT methodology that were strange to her at the start of the course (SO.3). Sarah felt herself lucky to be working with a curriculum being phased out that required adaptation: “Because while you are teaching you can see what you are learning ... there is no communicative task, so you can create them” (SI.4). All the practice had helped, as had learning to observe and evaluate this practice.

The research strand of the programme supported this development. Indeed, Sarah chose to investigate her use of communicative tasks for her dissertation; action research carried out in the last year of the course. She designed communicative tasks to supplement each of the six units of the coursebook, and used these with her classes. Sarah developed strategies to help her observe her own practice, produced tools for other observers to use, and recorded learners carrying out communicative tasks, getting a tape-recorder passed from group to group while she was monitoring elsewhere. She then had data to transcribe and analyse for features of authentic speech (Cook, 1989) (SA.7).

In-depth analysis led to insights. Reflecting on the November 2005 communicative task described above, for example, Sarah reported taped evidence of “repetition, hesitation, false starts, ellipsis and back channelling.” Language errors, for example, *How many eggs you want?*, indicated that learners were focusing on meaning rather than form, she thought. Many pairs were fully engaged in seeking to achieve task outcomes, in ways she believed were conducive to developing fluency. However, some did not use interaction strategies, focusing instead directly on the target language of yes/no questions, while others used expressions that were too formal for the context of a daughter talking to her mother. One student was overheard saying: “Excuse me. I would like to ask about the food.” Sarah concluded, on this occasion, that her learners needed greater exposure to authentic discourse and greater awareness of the social context in which language was used, further support in using interaction strategies as well as more such opportunities to interact meaningfully to develop skills (SA.6).

Data from the sources referred to above (primarily assignments and observations) indicate practical knowledge growth in planning, using and evaluating use of communicative tasks. To what extent were tensions between beliefs and practices resolved?

### **Outcomes: Tensions Partially Resolved**

Despite the successes Sarah had with communicative tasks, she remained conscious of the challenges involved in using them. “When you create a task, you can’t do it like magic,” Sarah reported late in the course (October 2005). “It requires hard work and concentration. The process of analysing and reviewing needs a clear mind.” Now, when planning, she could identify in the materials provided “which part, which step” was suitable for the learners, “which part might be difficult,” and she could see how she was “going to adapt or create something new.” However, it was not easy. There were various problems relating to the context (photocopying worksheets for large classes of 45, teachers of other subjects who did

not want the learners seated in groups). Furthermore, she had many responsibilities, as a teacher, mother, wife, senior English teacher. Sarah needed space and time to plan, she reported, and sometimes did this at home when the children were sleeping. She had “a lot of ideas now,” and when she could put them into practice, they made “teaching more exciting.” Learners liked communicative tasks “very much,” but contextual factors meant that it was still “difficult” to make use of them (SI.7).

Nevertheless, communicative tasks were well worth using, she argues in her dissertation (December 2005). They provide opportunities “for learners to practise their English in a funny and interesting way,” they increased motivation by encouraging a focus on meaning, they could be based on topics relating to learners’ life experiences, which made “learners willing to express their feelings and ideas,” and they “activated all parts of knowledge,” including language knowledge and schematic knowledge. They provide meaningful contexts that helped learners “try out hypotheses and repair communication breakdowns by using communication strategies,” they develop listening and comprehension skills and their use results in learner-centred classroom interaction. She concludes: “Communicative tasks are very essential in developing Omani learners’ speaking skills” (SA.7).

So, Sarah remained committed. “Before I didn’t have any idea about communicative tasks,” she reflected at the end of the course, “and I didn’t imagine that teaching would be in this way, that one day in Oman teaching would be like this and learning would be like this, and we would have this opportunity to communicate, to talk in English.” Sarah would continue to create communicative tasks to compensate for the deficiencies of the course materials, she told me, and would continue researching her practice in this. Even though it had been “very hard work,” it had been a “wonderful experience, doing something” for her students, observing them, identifying their difficulties and trying to find solutions (SI.7). She seemed assured about her continued use of CLT methodology in the future.

## **Discussion**

I now address my research questions. The first was as follows:

*1. To what extent did a teacher’s (Sarah’s) practical knowledge (PK) in using CLT methodology develop while she was engaged in a three-year BA (TESOL) programme?*

Sarah’s PK changed considerably. Prior to the course, she had seen her role as that of a transmitter of knowledge who needed to insist on accuracy. This role and accompanying behaviour, which she later saw as incompatible with CLT, started to change once she was exposed to theory on young learners and how they learn. This encouraged her to reflect on childhood experiences, which helped transform her beliefs. Beliefs, with their “potent affective, evaluative and episodic nature,” can be seen as inextricably linked to knowledge (Pajares, 1992, p. 325), but filtering new phenomena and acting as a driving force, influencing effort and persistence.

Once Sarah's beliefs about the role of the teacher, the nature of learning and the importance of CLT methodology had started to develop internal consistency, there was still a gap, though, between her beliefs about what she ought to do and what she did. This is not uncommon. For example, Nunan (1987) found that seven experienced ESL teachers in Australia (all with graduate diplomas, two also with MAs in applied linguistics) tended to use traditional interaction patterns in the classroom that did not encourage communicative language use, even though they were committed to CLT. Traditional practices abounded in the lessons observed by Sato and Kleinsasser, as they relate:

Although most teachers said that they used role-plays, games, simulations and so on, classes observed for this study were heavily teacher-fronted, grammar was presented without any context clues, and there were few interactions seen among students. (1999, p. 505)

Sarah's first two observed lessons (October 2003 & March 2004) were also teacher-fronted. However, she did contextualise language and use gentle error-correction techniques, thus using a mix of CLT and non-CLT elements (Mangubhai et al., 2007). The third lesson (April 2005), as I have related, was different, involving meaningful interaction between students, with the teacher primarily in a facilitative role.

By the end of the course, there was much greater congruence between Sarah's beliefs and practices than there had been earlier. Indeed, her PK became much closer to that of Doreen, the German teacher in Mangubhai et al.'s (2004) study than to the teachers described by Sato and Kleinsasser (1999). Doreen "had a sophisticated and well-developed practical theory of CLT that was reflected in her classroom practices" as Borg (2006, p. 98) reports. She believed that tasks should be real, meaningful, useful and related to students' interests, encouraged learners to express themselves without worrying about errors, felt that she had to teach them patterns of grammar, wanted them to feel comfortable in the language, listen to each other, support each other, take responsibility, and become independent. She wanted learners to hear the language in use and have the opportunity to talk spontaneously in closed pairs (Mangubhai et al., 2004). This is a description of Doreen, but it could also be a description of Sarah, which indicates her development.

In creating communicative tasks, Sarah chose topics that related to the students' real-life experiences and used fluent non-native speakers to provide input for exposure through listening texts. She was thus promoting "intercultural communicative competence" (Alptekin, 2002), while seeking to use the learner-centred interaction patterns associated with CLT. This was her choice, based on her decisions as to what was culturally appropriate.

As well as becoming more focused on her learners' communicative needs within their own culture and context, Sarah's designed tasks, as demonstrated above, became richer and more complex, characteristics identified by Johnson (2003) as indicative of the development of expertise in task design. Of course, it never became easy for Sarah to use CLT methodology. Her classes had 45 students, with all the implications that involves for organizing pairwork and groupwork, keeping learners on-task and preparing materials in an under-resourced

context. Nevertheless, she believed that using communicative tasks was worthwhile and persevered. This enabled her to resolve various tensions in her work to do with implementing CLT methodology. Resolving tensions in this way is central, as Freeman (1993) argues, to teacher development.

To summarize, there were various dimensions to Sarah's PK growth in CLT. Early in the course, exposure to public theory led her to question her beliefs, and prompted by this self-questioning, she challenged her own classroom practices. As a result, her beliefs appeared to become more internally consistent. She also developed PK in task design. Furthermore, while earlier observed lessons seemed to incorporate a mix of CLT and non-CLT elements, methodology in the third observed lesson seemed both compatible with CLT and culturally appropriate for the learners. Though observational evidence is limited, that available suggests Sarah was becoming better able both at handling contextual challenges and achieving synergy between beliefs and practices with regard to CLT.

I now address my second research question:

*2. How did the course, which seemed based on constructivist principles (Dangel & Guyton, 2004), appear to help her?*

The course seemed to help Sarah in two main ways, relating both to content and process. Regarding content, Sarah was supported by a programme of academic study that provided consistent, though steadily more complex, input about communicative tasks and CLT through a succession of inter-related modules.

As to how PK growth was achieved, formal knowledge was accommodated into Sarah's practical knowledge as she engaged in designing, teaching, and evaluating increasingly richer and more sophisticated communicative tasks. Sarah embraced CLT enthusiastically; her commitment led to innovative practice that went far beyond fulfilling course requirements. She made communicative tasks the focus of her dissertation, and had the opportunity to develop PK in CLT besides, in classroom practice that was not assessed (and usually not observed), while teaching four days a week throughout the programme.

Various features of the course helped. Recycled input allowed Sarah to consolidate and develop ideas, while a library she had access to that was established from project funds helped her read widely, as did use of the University's online library facilities. Furthermore, there were numerous opportunities to benefit from social interaction with peers (who were part of the same cohort) and with the regional tutor. Post-lesson discussions and tutorials offered support, and Sarah made good use of these, listening actively, asking questions, and reflecting. This was not one-shot INSET leading to confused attempts to apply concepts as in Lamb's (1995) experience. Rather the above description suggests that the programme conformed to a constructivist approach to teacher education, as elements regarded by Dangel & Guyton (2004) as integral to such an approach were present, that is, the syllabus of the programme was sensitive to the teachers and their context, encouraged collaborative

engagement, and emphasised the importance of analysing and adapting coursebook materials. Most fundamentally of all, it encouraged reflection.

## **Conclusion**

The main findings of this study are that, in a Middle-Eastern context, a teacher committed to the use of CLT to promote intercultural communicative competence could develop PK that allowed her to accommodate the main features of this methodology into her work. As noted, her beliefs became more internally consistent, more closely aligned to public theory, and were able to exert more influence on her practices. A constructivist language teacher education programme supported growth in her conceptual understanding of CLT and in her capacity to plan, use and evaluate her use of communicative tasks with large classes in a students' lower secondary school.

Sarah was not entirely unusual in developing in this way. After investigating the beliefs and practices of numerous graduates of the same programme (through surveys, interviews and observations) as part of an in-depth evaluation of the project, Freeman (2007, p. 42) was struck by "the professional confidence and sense of positive professional autonomy observed." Teachers were more flexible, adaptable and assured. Yet, in relation to CLT, Freeman noted, too, a gap between beliefs and practices, apparent from his observations of 10 lessons around the country (taught by current students as well as graduates):

Although in the post-observation interviews, participants did speak about their understanding of communicative tasks and how these contribute to student motivation, both of which points they said were informed by the BA project experience, they did not always act on these understandings in the lessons we observed. (2007, p. 31)

This underlines the difficulty of achieving synergy between beliefs and practices, even when supported by such an in-depth in-service programme. It also puts Sarah's success in focus. Academically, Sarah was above average, and she was also well established in her school as a Senior English Teacher, factors which may have given her more self-confidence to experiment.

This brings me to the limitations of the research. In this article, I have focused on a single case, that of a teacher who expressed commitment towards CLT methodology early in a three-year programme and then sustained that commitment throughout, supported by an ideologically committed insider researcher (Holliday, 2002), whose own beliefs about CLT lay in the same direction. Limitations, therefore, include threats to trustworthiness posed by researcher biases, respondent biases, as well as reactivity—the effect of the researcher on the setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have tried to overcome these threats by being reflexive in constantly checking, questioning, and theoretically re-interpreting findings, as Kvale (1996) suggests. Furthermore, I have tried to enhance credibility through using tactics recommended by Lincoln & Guba (1985); prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation and member checking. However, classroom observations throughout the data collection period

were not as persistent as I would have liked, as my work schedule for visiting schools dictated that there were sometimes lengthy gaps between data gathering opportunities.

Clearly, I cannot generalize findings. As Stake (1995, p. 8) argues, though: “The real business of case study is particularization.” Accordingly, I have endeavoured to provide “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) to support the reader’s vicarious understanding (Borg, 1997). Triangulation was crucial here.

Analysing Sarah’s assignments provided insights into her cognitive development in planning communicative tasks, while lesson observations allowed me to record her changing practices, and interviews allowed access to her thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Comparing assignments written at different stages of the programme, lessons taught and interviews conducted throughout her studies provided insights into her PK growth with regard to CLT that I could analyse, subject to matrix analyses (Robson, 2002) and then draw upon in creating thick description.

Evidence from this one case does suggest that in-service teacher education outside English-speaking Western ELT can make a difference with regard to PK growth in CLT. However, there is clearly a need for further qualitative research in this area. Teachers’ developing cognitions on such programmes need to be studied so that decisions about what is appropriate content on teacher education courses in various contexts are made on the basis of empirical research.

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