

Bridging the gap : Secondary School EFL Teachers' Conceptualizations of CLT and Contextual Constraints on Implementation

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سد الفجوة: تصورات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المدارس الثانوية حول التعلم القائم على التعلم والقيود السياقية على التنفيذ

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الملخص

تناولت هذه الدراسة النوعية مختلف طرق تفكير معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في المرحلة الثانوية حول الأفكار الكامنة وراء تدريس اللغة التواصلية (CLT) وكيفية استخدامه في الفصل الدراسي. على الرغم من أن تدريس اللغة التواصلية (CLT) معترف به على نطاق واسع كأكثر الطرق فعالية لتعزيز الكفاءة التواصلية، إلا أنه غالبًا ما يوجد تفاوت كبير بين تأييده النظري وتطبيقه العملي في الفصل الدراسي. استخدم هذا البحث تصميمًا نوعيًا يتضمن مقابلات شخصية شبه منظمة مع عشرة معلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تم اختيارهم بعناية لتوضيح فهمهم المفاهيم ومواقفهم والتحديات الخاصة التي يواجهونها. حدد المعلمون بأغلبية ساحقة الكفاءة التواصلية كهدف أساسي، وأكدوا على الدور الحاسم للتفاعل في اكتساب اللغة، ودعوا إلى بيئة تركز على المتعلم. أظهرت النتائج توافقًا قويًا ومتسقًا مع المبادئ الأساسية لتدريس اللغة التواصلية. ومع ذلك، حدد المعلمون العديد من العقبات التي أعاقت تطبيقهم الكامل، على الرغم من هذا الدعم واجه المعلمين بعض التحديات أهمها اعتماد الطلاب المفرط على لغتهم الأم، ومقاومة الطلاب، وضعف حافز الطلاب نتيجة لتوقعات التعلم التقليدية، والتعارض المستعصي بين أساليب التواصل والامتحانات التقليدية عالية المخاطر التي تركز على القواعد النحوية، والصعوبات اللوجستية المرتبطة بأعداد الطلاب الكبيرة في الفصول الدراسية، والنقص المنتشر في فرص التطوير المهني المستهدف. وفي الختام، تشير هذه الدراسة إلى أن القيود النظامية والهيكلية للبيئة التعليمية، وليست قنوات المُدرِّسين، هي العوائق الرئيسية أمام تطبيق (CLT) ولتحقيق إصلاح ناجح ودائم، يجب على واضعي السياسات والمؤسسات معالجة المشكلات الرئيسية المتمثلة في المناهج الدراسية القائمة على الامتحانات، وأعداد الطلاب في الفصول الدراسية، والحاجة إلى تدريب عملي مخصص للمُدرِّسين. وتشير التصورات الإيجابية للمُدرِّسين إلى استعدادهم لتبني ممارسات تواصلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (CLT) تدريس اللغة التواصلية، من وجهة نظر المعلمين.

Abstract

This qualitative study looked into the different ways that secondary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers think about the ideas behind and how to use Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the classroom. Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is widely recognized as the most effective method for enhancing communicative competence, a considerable disparity frequently exists between its theoretical endorsement and practical implementation in the classroom. The research employed a qualitative design featuring semi-structured interviews with ten purposefully selected EFL teachers to elucidate their conceptual

understanding, attitudes, and the particular challenges they face. Teachers overwhelmingly identified communicative competence as the primary objective, emphasized the critical role of interaction in language acquisition, and advocated for a learner-centered classroom environment. The results demonstrated a strong and consistent conceptual alignment with the core tenets of CLT. Nevertheless, the instructors identified numerous contextual obstacles that deterred their complete implementation, despite this philosophical backing. The most significant challenges reported included students' excessive reliance on their native language (L1), student resistance and low motivation resulting from conventional learning expectations, an irreconcilable conflict between communicative methods and grammar-focused, high-stakes examinations, logistical difficulties related to large class sizes, and a pervasive lack of targeted professional development opportunities. In conclusion, this study suggests that the systemic and structural limitations of the educational environment, rather than the beliefs of the instructors, are the principal obstacles to the implementation of CLT. To achieve successful, long-lasting reform, policymakers and institutions must deal with the main problems of exam-driven curricula, class sizes, and the need for practical, context-specific teacher training. The teachers' favorable perceptions indicate a willingness to adopt communicative practices.

Keywords: (CLT) Communicative language teaching, teachers' perception.

Introduction

The global prevalence of English as the primary lingua franca for international communication, commerce, and academia has greatly increased the importance of effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. In response to this need, teaching methods have changed. Over the past forty years, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become the most popular and widely used method. Promoted as a paradigm shift from traditional grammar-translation approaches. The primary aim of CLT is communicative competence, described as the ability to use language correctly and effectively in real-life situations (Savignon, 2018). The basic ideas behind CLT, which stress meaningful interaction, real communication, and activities that are centred on the learner, are a big change from structural syllabi and rote memorisation.

Despite its widespread theoretical endorsement and integration into global curricular frameworks, a significant and well-documented disparity often exists between the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and its practical application in various English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Li, 1998). This theory-practice gap indicates that the successful implementation of CLT is not a simple process of application; instead, it is influenced by a crucial factor: the classroom teacher. Teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes are the primary determinants of instructional delivery, significantly impacting the interpretation, adaptation, and implementation of pedagogical innovations (Borg, 2006). These perceptions do not exist in isolation; they are shaped by a multifaceted interplay of factors, including cultural context, institutional limitations, assessment frameworks, class sizes, and the instructors' personal language acquisition experiences (Ellis, 1996; Karim, 2004).

Consequently, the execution of a communicative approach devoid of a thorough understanding of the teacher's perspective is prone to yield either superficial compliance or outright resistance. Studies indicate that EFL teachers often express theoretical support for CLT while simultaneously possessing significant doubts about its practicality. These concerns may be associated with the limitations of high-stakes, grammar-centric assessments, insufficient preparation or resources, apprehension regarding diminished teacher authority, or perceived discord with local educational cultures (Rao, 2002). Thus, the exploration of teachers' perspectives is not merely an academic pursuit; it represents a pivotal initial step in understanding the realities of the EFL classroom and reconciling methodological theory with practice.

The goal of this paper is to improve this understanding by looking into what EFL teachers think about Communicative Language Teaching. The goal is to look at how teachers think about the pros and cons of CLT, the things that help or hurt its use from their point of view, and how their views are put into practice in the classroom. This study aims to provide insights that can enhance teacher training programs, facilitate supportive policy-making, and ultimately, foster more genuine and effective communicative language learning experiences for students by analyzing these nuanced beliefs.

Literature review

Overview of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) started in the 1970s as a response to the limitations of traditional grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. Hymens (1972) characterizes communicative competence as the ability to utilize language proficiently in social contexts. The main goal of CLT is to help people get better at this. Richards (2006) says that CLT puts a lot of emphasis on real-world communication, fluency over accuracy, and activities that are centered on the learner, like role plays, discussions, and assignments.

Richards and Rodgers (2014) note that CLT is not a fixed method, but a broad approach that can be tailored to fit different situations. For CLT to work, though, the classroom culture and the way teachers think about things need to change, as well as the curriculum.

Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs in Language Teaching

Teachers' perceptions are a crucial factor in the implementation of any pedagogical approach, including CLT. Borg (2003) asserts that teacher cognition, which includes their knowledge, beliefs, and cognitive processes, affects how they understand and use language teaching methods. Phipps and Borg (2009) discovered that educators are more likely to integrate CLT principles into their teaching when they possess positive attitudes towards communicative methodologies.

These perceptions are formed over a lifetime of experiences, commencing with the "apprenticeship of observation" during student years and advancing to professional training and classroom engagement (Borg, 2003). So, when teachers come across a new idea like CLT, they use it to support what they already believe. If they think that effective teaching is based on teacher authority and grammar instruction, they are more likely to see CLT as chaotic, ineffective, or culturally inappropriate (Rao, 2002). Therefore, it is essential to understand these perceptions to grasp the results of any educational reform.

Nevertheless, research indicates that classroom practices often mirror traditional, teacher-centered approaches, despite educators' claims of endorsing CLT (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). This difference could be due to limitations in the context or deeply held beliefs about how people learn languages that have been shaped by their own schooling.

Challenges to Implementing CLT in EFL Contexts

Even though CLT is widely promoted, especially in EFL settings, it is often hard to use in real life because of a number of problems. These include insufficient teaching resources, exam-centric educational frameworks, excessive class sizes, and limited instructional periods (Littlewood, 2007). However, the implementation of CLT may be further complicated by the fact that students may have limited exposure to authentic English input outside of the classroom in many EFL settings (Butler, 2011). Cultural factors also play a big role. The interactive and student-led aspects of CLT may contradict the expectations of both learners and instructors within teacher-centered educational traditions, particularly in certain Asian regions (Hu, 2002). Consequently, "localization" or "hybridization" refers to a phenomenon that arises when CLT is only partially implemented or adapted to align with local norms (Holliday, 1994).

Empirical Studies on EFL Teachers' Perceptions of CLT

Many studies have looked at how EFL teachers see CLT and how these views affect their teaching. Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) found that Japanese teachers had a positive view of CLT in theory, but they had trouble putting it into practice because of problems with their schools and not enough training. In a similar manner, Al-Seghayer (2017) indicated that Saudi EFL teachers were generally supportive of CLT; however, they recognized systemic barriers, such as standardized testing and limited professional development opportunities. These results highlight a persistent trend: While CLT is conceptually embraced, its execution is often hindered by both internal and external factors. Consequently, it is essential to examine the viewpoints of educators to understand the optimal strategies for integrating CLT into EFL teaching methodologies.

Research Question

1. *What are EFL teachers' perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the classroom?*
2. What are the challenges that teachers face in the implementation of CLT?

Research objectives

The main goal of this study is to look closely at all the different parts of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as it is used by EFL teachers. The study seeks to examine the perceptions and convictions of EFL educators concerning the effectiveness of CLT in facilitating successful language acquisition for their students. Secondly, it aims to identify the challenges that teachers face during the implementation of CLT.

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). A qualitative methodology is most appropriate given that the study's objectives are exploratory and seek to understand the complex and nuanced aspects of teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach seeks to obtain detailed, nuanced data about individuals' "lived experiences," and challenges of the application of CLT as opposed to quantitative methods that evaluate frequency or correlation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6)

Participants and Sampling

The research study focused on a Target Population of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who currently work in secondary schools. A Sample Size of 10 EFL teachers was selected for participation. The Sampling Method employed was Purposive Sampling, a non-probability technique particularly suited for qualitative research because it enables the researcher to intentionally select participants who possess specific attributes relevant to the study's inquiries. In line with this method, clear selection standards were set to ensure the chosen participants would provide the most relevant data. These criteria were: the teachers must be currently teaching English in a secondary school, and they must have a minimum of two years of teaching experience, which guarantees they possess sufficient classroom experience to have formed informed perceptions pertinent to the research

Data Collection

The data for this study was exclusively obtained through semi-structured interviews. This strategy finds a middle ground between having a list of questions ready to go and being able to ask follow-up questions when someone gives an answer that surprises or interests you.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to examine the data gathered from the interview. This entails identifying and comprehending patterns or themes in the participants' responses. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher carefully examined the data to become acquainted with it, subsequently developing initial codes based on recurring themes and subjects. These codes were grouped into bigger themes that show how the participants felt, what they went through, and what they found hard about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The subjects will be further revised and evaluated about the research questions and pertinent literature. To guarantee trustworthiness, the analysis will incorporate actual quotations from participants and transparently disclose the methodology employed.

Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed a strong agreement among the educators regarding the core principles of CLT. Three main themes came up, showing that teachers think that being able to communicate, interact, and focus on the learner are all important for learning a language well.

Communicative Competence as the Primary Objective

Almost all of the teachers agreed that helping students improve their ability to communicate was the most important goal of teaching English. They repeatedly characterized successful learning as the capacity to utilize language effectively and appropriately, rather than solely attaining grammatical precision.

"What's the point of my students knowing all the grammar rules if they cannot order a coffee or express an opinion? My main goal is to make them capable communicators."

"I judge my students' progress by their ability to handle a real-life situation. Even if they make mistakes, if the message is understood, that is a success for me."

Interaction as the Essential Mechanism for Learning

Participants consistently stated that interaction was the most important way to learn a language. It is important for students to talk to each other and to their professors in class because language learning happens when meaning is conveyed.

"Language is a social tool. It must be practiced socially. I use pair work and group discussions because it multiplies the speaking time for each student compared to a teacher-fronted lesson."

"Through interaction, students learn to negotiate meaning, they learn from each other, and they gain confidence. You can see the difference in their fluency."

Learner-Centeredness as a Pathway to Engagement

The study revealed that teachers prioritize a learner-centered classroom environment. They understood that shifting focus from the teacher to the students increases engagement and fosters independence.

"When I plan a role-play, I let them choose the scenario. When they are interested and have a choice, they participate more willingly and the language becomes more authentic."

"My role is more of a facilitator now. I set up the activity and then let them work. It's about empowering them to use the language themselves, not just listening to me."

Challenges in Implementing CLT

Despite positive perceptions of CLT, teachers reported a range of **practical challenges** that hinder its full implementation. These challenges reflect both **contextual limitations** and **pedagogical tensions** within their teaching environments

a. **Over-Reliance on the Native Language (L1)**

Several teachers noted that students often revert to their **first language** during pair or group work, which undermines the communicative goals of CLT.

"Even in group discussions, they slip back into L1. It's hard to maintain the English-only environment without constant monitoring."

b. **Student Resistance and Low Motivation**

Some teachers mentioned that students were **unfamiliar with learner-centered approaches** and preferred traditional methods, which led to resistance or low engagement.

"They expect me to lecture and give them grammar exercises. When I ask them to do a role-play or discussion, some just stay silent."

c. **Curriculum Mismatch**

The CLT approach sometimes clashed with **exam-oriented curricula** that emphasize grammar and vocabulary memorization rather than communication.

"The textbook and exams are all grammar-based, so I feel conflicted. If I focus too much on speaking, they might not perform well on the tests."

d. **Balancing Fluency and Accuracy**

Teachers expressed difficulty in **balancing the focus on fluency (a CLT priority) with the need for grammatical accuracy**, especially in exam contexts.

"Sometimes I want to let mistakes go in conversation, but I worry they'll form bad habits that affect their writing and test scores."

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e. **Large Class Sizes**

Large class sizes were cited as a major **logistical obstacle** to implementing interactive techniques.

"With 40 students in one class, how do you monitor all the group discussions or give everyone a chance to speak?"

f. **Time Constraints and Syllabus Pressure**

Limited instructional time and pressure to **complete dense syllabus** also hindered the use of communicative activities.

"Group activities take time. We have to finish the book, so I often skip the interactive parts to save time."

g. **Lack of Training and Misconceptions about CLT**

Some participants acknowledged a **lack of professional development** opportunities or **unclear understanding** of how to implement CLT effectively.

"We're told to use CLT, but there's no training. Some teachers think it just means playing games or avoiding grammar."

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that, on a conceptual level, the EFL teachers in this sample strongly support the core principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Their positive perspectives on communicative competence, interaction, and learner-centeredness correspond with the theoretical principles of Communicative Language Teaching as delineated in the literature (Hymes, 1972; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This finding is particularly significant in light of the well-documented "theory-practice gap" often observed between educational principles and real classroom environments (Li, 1998; Borg, 2006). The results of this study suggest that this disparity may not stem from an inherent conflict with the principles of CLT, but rather from external and systemic barriers that hinder implementation.

The teachers' responses show that they strongly agree with the idea behind Communicative Language Teaching, which is to focus on real communication. In contrast to previous research that depicted communicative strategies as disorganized or culturally inappropriate (Rao, 2002), the participants in this study exhibited confidence in the relevance and effectiveness of these methods for their students. This corroborates the claim

made by Phipps and Borg (2009) that positive teacher beliefs are crucial in facilitating the implementation of innovative methodologies in practice. The participants viewed communicative competence as both a desirable outcome and the principal aim of language training, indicating a philosophical alignment with the objectives of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Despite this conceptual alignment, the educators acknowledged several significant challenges that impede the effective implementation of CLT in their classrooms. These obstacles represent a broader spectrum of structural and contextual limitations, many of which align with findings from previous studies (Littlewood, 2007; Al-Seghayer, 2017). One common problem that was found was that students tended to rely too much on their home language (L1) during class activities. While group discussions and pair work are essential components of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), many educators have noted that students often revert to their native language, which undermines opportunities for authentic English communication.

Moreover, teachers reported varying levels of student resistance and reduced motivation, particularly during the execution of learner-centered or interactive activities. Many students, accustomed to traditional, teacher-centered instruction, appeared apprehensive about the demands of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which requires heightened engagement, initiative, and risk-taking in language use. This highlights a gap between what students expect and the changes that need to be made to teaching methods to make them more communicative.

Issues with the curriculum and tests also turned out to be big problems. Teachers said that there was a clear difference between the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which focusses on verbal communication and engagement, and the grammar-centered, assessment-driven curricula they have to follow. This sometimes led to a conflict between getting students ready for high-stakes tests and getting them involved in communication activities that focus on fluency instead of accuracy. This relates to another problem that teachers have pointed out: the difficulty of balancing fluency with grammatical accuracy. While Communicative Language Teaching encourages the acceptance of errors for the purpose of communication, numerous educators voiced apprehension that uncorrected mistakes may become entrenched, particularly in contexts where written accuracy is stringently assessed.

Logistical issues such as large class sizes and time constraints, made it harder to use CLT. Managing communication activities with 30 or more students was described as difficult, especially when teachers had to cover a lot of material in a short amount of time. These practical difficulties often forced teachers to give up interactive parts in favor of more efficient, teacher-centered methods. Ultimately, many participants said that not enough professional development was getting in the way of effective implementation. Several educators conveyed uncertainty about activity design, classroom interaction management, and the integration of communicative techniques with the current curriculum due to a lack of specialised training in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods. In many cases, there were still misunderstandings about CLT, with some teachers thinking it was just about playing games or not teaching grammar at all.

The data suggest that the obstacles to CLT implementation arise not from teacher reluctance, but from the complex contexts in which they function. This study contends that teachers ought not to be regarded as resistant to change, but rather as professionals striving to implement what they consider most advantageous for their students, while navigating conflicting institutional, curricular, and cultural pressures. Their support for CLT principles shows that they are open to using communicative methods, as long as they get enough help, training, and flexibility within their institutions. These results indicate that the challenges to CLT implementation are not due to teacher resistance but rather the intricate contexts in which they operate.

This study posits that teachers are professionals endeavoring to implement what they perceive as beneficial for their students, while concurrently managing conflicting institutional, curricular, and cultural obligations, rather than being resistant to change. Their support for CLT principles shows that they are willing to use communicative methods if they are given enough training, support, and freedom in their own institutions.

Future research should therefore go beyond analyzing teacher perspectives and focus more on the expression or constraints of these concepts within the classroom setting. Longitudinal or classroom-based research may clarify how educators strive to implement Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in practice and how they adapt their methodologies when faced with challenges such as student resistance or examination pressure. Furthermore, future research may investigate the impacts of targeted professional development or curriculum adjustments to determine if institutional support can bridge the gap between belief and practice. These steps are

very important for moving from theoretical support to the real and long-lasting use of communicative language teaching in EFL settings.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of EFL instructors regarding Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in order to understand their conceptual alignment with its principles and the practical challenges faced in its implementation. The findings demonstrated that educators strongly support the core tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), including the focus on communicative competencies, the importance of interaction, and the requirement for learner-centered instruction. The positive impressions indicate that teachers do not oppose CLT as a methodology; instead, they regard it as essential for preparing students to use English proficiently in practical contexts.

However, contextual problems make it very hard to carry out CLT, even though it makes sense logically. These factors include students not wanting to learn, relying too much on their first language, differences between the curriculum and the tests, large class sizes, not enough time, and not enough professional training. These findings underscore that instructional transformation cannot succeed solely through policy mandates. To use CLT well in EFL classrooms, changes need to be made to the whole system, especially to the curriculum, teacher training, and support from the school.

This study emphasises the necessity of prioritizing teachers' perspectives in educational innovation. Their results give a deep understanding of what CLT can and can't do in practice. To bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and their practical application in the classroom, collaboration among policymakers, curriculum developers, teacher educators, and educators is essential.

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