



How Appropriates Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in EFL Context (an Iranian Case Study)

Mehran Memari*

Farhangiyah University, Ahvaz, IRAN

*Corresponding author's e-mail: memari_english001@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been regarded as one of the ideal teaching approaches by many researchers and practitioners for the past three decades in the field of foreign and second language education. Yet, studies reported in many EFL countries have approved that there is resistance against CLT. As Widdowson perceived, the English language teaching that takes communicative competence as the invariable goal does not fit in the EFL contexts where learners' engagement in social interaction with native English speakers is minimal. The purpose of this study is to investigate the Iranian teachers' understanding of English teaching, predominantly the difficulties and challenges they face in the implementation of CLT practices in the Iranian context. The target population of this study was 220 Junior high school teachers of English in Khuzestan, Iran. The data for this study was collected through a questionnaire of 80 items and informal interviews. The results of the study showed that although the teachers are aware of the CLT and its concepts, they still reported that they have teacher based classrooms and used drills. Thus, based on the findings of the study, some implications are presented for teacher development and design of the English courses in Junior high schools.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Competence, Foreign language, Interaction.

INTRODUCTION

English is seen as playing a significant role in "promoting international exchange, acquiring scientific knowledge and technological expertise, fostering economic progress, and participating in international competition" [1]. Diversity in language needs demand for the diverse language instructional strategies. "The selection of methods and materials appropriate to both goals and the context of teaching begin with an analysis of learners' needs and styles of learning, socially defined" [2].

The language teaching methods are very important for the purpose of learning and teaching in every language. English is one of most widely spoken language on earth and used in many areas such as technology, science, business. The worldwide demand has created an enormous demand for quality language teaching and language teaching materials and resources.

All language teaching approaches "operate explicitly from a theory of language and beliefs or theories about how language is learned" [3]. 'As a language teaching approach originated and nurtured in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts, how appropriate CLT is, and, how can it be implemented to maximize its strengths and benefits for EFL learners' [4] are the issues of interest for the researchers and language instructors today.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been regarded as one of the ideal teaching approaches by many researchers and practitioners for the past three decades in the field of foreign and second language education. Yet, studies reported in many EFL countries have approved that there is resistance against CLT. As Widdowson perceived, the English language teaching that takes communicative competence as the invariable goal does not fit in the EFL contexts where learners' engagement in social interaction with native English speakers is minimal.

What Is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)?

Since its emergence as essentially a British innovation, CLT has expanded in scope and now is widely utilized as one of the most prominent language teaching methodologies around the world. Despite its apparent

popularity, many teachers remain somewhat confused about what exactly CLT is. In accordance with a classification proposed by Howatt [5], CLT consists of a "weak" and a "strong" version. The weak version of CLT highlights the significance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes. Howatt [5] describes the weak version of CLT as "learning to use English".

On the contrary, strong version of CLT is based on the claim that "language is acquired through communication" [5]. This version proposes that teachers provide learners with ample opportunities to familiarize themselves with how language is used in actual communication. It entails "using English to learn it".

In CLT, meaning is given prime importance, which is achieved through interaction and negotiation. There are a variety of communicative activities like games, role plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks, which offer learners an opportunity to practice their communication skills meaningfully.

Curriculum development, syllabus design, and classroom instruction are all centered on the development of learners' communicative competence. Certain salient features of CLT distinguish it from other language-teaching approaches: (a) communicative classroom activities, (b) learner-centered approach, (c) authentic teaching materials, (d) error toleration, (e) teachers as facilitators, and (f) fluency above accuracy.

The Roles of Teachers in the Classroom: The teacher is not a model for correct speech and writing and does not have the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences. The teacher is facilitator/ advisor, answering questions, monitoring their performance, note making of their errors, and co-communicator.

The Roles of Learners in the Classroom: Communicators should participate in classroom activities cooperatively rather than individualistically, be comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rely less on the teacher as a model, and take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning.

CLT is being used for both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). But it is notable that there is a distinction between ESL and EFL contexts. Although both ESL and EFL refer to the teaching of English to non-native speakers, ESL takes place within an English-speaking environment. This represents students learning English in the United States, Canada, England, Australia or any other country where English is the primary language of interaction, communication, and business. Students thus live and interact with native speakers, and have immense exposure to the target language [6].

EFL occurs outside the target language environment. It represents students that are learning English in countries like Japan, Korea, China, Bangladesh, Mexico, Saudi Arabia or any other country where English is not the primary form of interaction and communication among people. In this situation, English is part of the school curriculum, or part of extra-curricular activities in language institutes. Generally, students in these situations have exposure to the target language only during class time [6].

The distinct features of CLT and EFL contexts as opposed to ESL might already foretell that the implementation of CLT will not begin on the same path in EFL as in ESL contexts, as much evidence provided by previous research studies have demonstrated. A wealth of literature has sprung up delving into the reasons responsible for the tough course CLT has undergone in EFL contexts.

Objectives and Significance of the Study

Based on the above introduction and history the researcher has formulated the following as the purpose of the study and research questions.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Iranian teachers' understanding of English teaching, predominantly the difficulties and challenges they face in the implementation of CLT practices in the Iranian context. So, the research questions are:

1. What do Iranian EFL teachers understand to be the key features of communicative language teaching (CLT)?
2. What are the difficulties and challenges that Iranian EFL teachers are worried about in implementing CLT in their classrooms?
3. How effective do they think in-service and workshops are in preparing them to use CLT?

Literature review

Actually what CLT is, how it is implemented in real class room situation and what characteristics of language should be emphasized has made the phenomenon a bit suspicious and complex for the educators as there had been a difference of opinion about this issue. Many definitions include meaningful communication and message conveying in CLT. The practice of language form is another important issue for some scholars and educators. Some arguments go to this extreme as to whether or not include other literacy skills in CLT like the use of L1, teaching of grammar and vocabulary. All these issues have made CLT somewhat problematic for the teachers. The difference of opinion and polarity arguments while interpreting the original meaning of CLT has made its implementation difficult. Indeed, CLT in this modern time has reached on a turning point. Many educators and linguists have urged to include language form and structure to make CLT approach more meaning-oriented for L2 instruction [7, 8]. The weak and strong version of CLT approach is another issue which has invited

the attention of many scholars. It argues the difference of “learning to use English” and “using English to learn it”. According to Howatt [5], ‘the weak version of CLT stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use the target language for communication purpose and attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching. The strong version of CLT is that language is acquired through communication’. For a better understanding, first we need to analyze the hypothetical L2 learning. Then, some of the major characteristics of CLT approach will be discussed.

From the beginning, the proponents of CLT have claimed to prove its effectiveness in ELT. Chowdhry [9] wrote that ‘When CLT was introduced across Europe, the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in which it would inevitably be applied was not considered’. Likewise, Ramanathan [10] asserted that ‘The much professed and popular theories devised in the inner-circle of countries may or may not be compatible with the teaching conditions in the outer-circle countries’.

A study conducted in Vietnam identified class size, grammar-based examinations, and lack of exposure to authentic language as constraints on using CLT [6]. Another study, of English teachers’ perceived difficulties in adopting CLT in South Korea, suggested that EFL countries like South Korea need to change their fundamental approach to education before CLT can be adopted, because “the predominance of text-centered and grammar-centered practices in Korea does not provide a basis for the student-centered, fluency-focused, and problem-solving activities required by CLT” [11].

There are also reports of communicative approaches being welcomed and resulting in positive learning experiences in EFL contexts. For example, Wang [12] reports the success of communication-based teaching with particular attention to oral competence in a foreign language school in China. Although the goals of communicative language teaching are not limited to spoken language, Wang reports that in this particular setting an emphasis on oral communication was seen to contribute to learners’ development of skills in not only listening and speaking but also in reading and writing. Anderson [13] indicates that despite the difficulties that may hinder innovation, there is a growing recognition among teachers and learners of the advantages of using a communicative approach. And many teachers have reported progress in teaching communicatively. In his summary of research findings related to learner-centered approaches, Nunan [14] identifies the involvement of learners in making meaning with both their teacher and their peers as a key factor in determining success. Finally, Kleinsasser [15] has examined the interaction between school context, teacher perceptions, and teacher performance and found a reciprocal relationship between teacher performance and the particular instructional or technical culture in which teachers find themselves. Teacher performance is affected by and situated in the technical culture which, in turn, is shaped by the way teachers go about their daily tasks (see also Sato 2002).

CLT has become widespread in English language teaching since its emergence in the 1970s. Besides its quick expansion in ESL contexts, CLT has been implemented in EFL contexts too. To increase the number of learners who are able to effectively communicate in English, national language education policies in EFL countries have moved towards CLT since the 1990s [16].

Zhang [17] in CLT in China: Frustrations, Misconceptions, and Clarifications, mentions a few cultural barriers in applying CLT across mainland China, such as the unsupportive environment where English usage lacks, the inability of teachers to communicate using English, and the examination system which still focuses on grammar. Even though China has now economically shifted to liberal capitalism, the remnants of communism can still be found in education, like in permanent and unchangeable class seating, which does not allow group work to happen – a requirement for CLT to occur.

A research by Gahin & Mayhill [18] showed two roadblocks in the application of CLT in Egypt. First are extrinsic barriers covering economic factors which include low wages, lack of resources, and large classes without adequate facilities; pressure from parents, students, principals, and supervisors cause teachers to sacrifice an ideal CLT syllabus? Second are intrinsic barriers covering cultural factors which include passive-student traditions, negative-to-group-work attitudes, and influences of colleagues in other, teacher-dominated subjects? Furthermore, the ability of teachers, in particular 41% of English teachers of which are non-specialists lacking in pedagogical performance and speaking, as well as inconsistencies between syllabus and exams also contribute to the intrinsic barriers.

The following are foreign language teaching principles that teachers, writers of teaching media and materials, and even developers of foreign language curriculums can expand upon [19]:

- * Students will learn a foreign language best if they are treated as individuals with their own needs and interests, they are given a chance to participate in communication by using the language in various activities, the communicative activities given to them are comprehensible and relevant to their needs and interests, they focus on various language forms and skills, as well as various learning strategies to support language acquisition, they are aware of the role, function, and nature of that language, they are given appropriate feedback regarding their achievement.

- * Students will learn a foreign language well if they are given a chance to arrange their own conversations.

- * Students will learn a foreign language well if they practice using the language in the cultural context of that foreign language.

By applying the above principals, teachers are challenged to apply CLT which is appropriate to our context. For example, to treat students as individuals in a large classroom consisting of 40-50 students is not an easy task. However, teachers can group them into several groups based on their English proficiency level. What was applied

to Vietnam [20] can also be applied in the Indonesian context. Considering that one of the requirements of CLT is “real communication”, Pham thus required conditions like directing real communication to answer the teacher in an “oral symphony”, knowing that the students preferred to converse as a single large classroom instead of doing group work. Similarly, in China [21], the CLT model was complemented with innovations such as task-based exercises that stress teacher-assisted exercises which then impacted communicative competence. Liao adds that teaching can be started with listening exercises. Thus being the case, there is a need to increase usage of learning media such as audio, video, and pictures.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The two hundred and twenty participants in this study were all Junior high school teachers of English who are busy teaching English as a foreign language in different general junior high schools in Iran. They have different academic degrees but their fields of study are English teaching. These 220 teachers were selected from among the English teachers of Khuzestan province, Iran. They participated in some in-services and workshops on CLT and were volunteers to participate in this research by filling the related questionnaire and participate in a free interview. None of them had the opportunity of studying or working in English speaking countries. The subjects were not homogenous in terms of age, years of teaching experience, gender and academic degree. So, the participants’ distribution by age, years of teaching experience, gender and academic degree are given in tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. Age Distribution

AGE	21 – 29	30 – 39	40 – 49	MORE	TOTAL
MALE	15	42	25	3	85
FEMALE	32	74	29	*	135
TOTAL	47	116	54	3	220

Table 2. Experience Distribution

EXPERIENCE	1 - 5	5 – 10	10 – 20	MORE
MALE	12	29	27	17
FEMALE	15	46	58	16
TOTAL	27	75	85	33

Table 3. Degree Distribution

DEGREE	AA	BA	MA	HIGHER
MALE	10	71	4	*
FEMALE	22	102	11	*
TOTAL	32	173	15	0

2. Instruments

The first instrument in this study was a four-part, 80 item questionnaire. The questionnaire gathers data about personal information, school information, teaching methodology, and challenges and difficulties in adopting CLT. The second instrument was a semi-structured and informal interview done by the researcher who is the instructor of the in-service course.

3. Procedure

All the participants in the study participated in a 40-hour in-service course about the theories and application of CLT. After one month they participate in a series of workshops on "CLT and its application in EFL classes". During the workshops they were responsible to have a controlled teaching based on CLT instructions. Finishing the workshops, they filled the questionnaire and then they participated in the interview. To address the research questions and also to fulfill the purpose of study, the data were analyzed.

RESULTS

To address the research questions and also to fulfill the purpose of this study, the descriptive and inferential analyses were done. The analysis here are presented and organized into four parts to correspond respectively to teachers, students, educational system, and CLT factors.

Based on the participants view about the role of the teachers, most of them believe that teachers play a crucial role in applying CLT, and it seems that teachers' attitude toward the CLT is positive and indicates a welcoming atmosphere toward the implementation of CLT; though they pointed out some difficulties and challenges. There are no significant differences between male and female in all the sub-levels related to teachers' factor. The participants state that attending workshops and participating in in-service courses and related seminars will help them, though they believe they are trained traditionally and it takes time to change. The major views are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Teacher Factor

Sex	Willingness	Attitude	Teaching skills	Motivation	Adequate training
Female	90	85	64	68	45
Male	89	70	58	55	46

The teachers as participants strongly believe that the students factor impede the implementation of CLT too. Again there are no significant differences between males and females in all sub-levels. The findings show that though there is a good enough attitude and willingness among students but cultural and educational bonds can make problems implementing CLT, and this causes the motivation to be reduced. The cultural values are the sub-level which should be under consideration here. The participant idea about the students' roles for helping teachers implementing CLT is shown in table 5.

Table 5. Student Factor

Sex	Willingness	Motivation	Proficiency level	Educational values	Cultural values	Class participation
Female	92	87	72	70	72	70
Male	95	90	64	68	72	69

Educational system can be the best support for the teachers and also for the success of the process. No change is going to be successful unless all the factors together help. As we see it takes time, chance and energy to change the educational system in the suitable level and situation. Educational system and its role as an important factor in participant point of view is shown in table 6.

Table 6. Educational System Factor

Sex	Exam instrument	Devoted time	Class size	System support	School atmosphere	Test oriented system
Female	38	35	30	48	40	41
Male	39	38	30	45	32	35

CLT has its own characteristics, and it needs a specific situations and facilities. To use CLT approach in a specific situation some modification is needed. As the data show, all the sub-levels in CLT factor need serious change and modification for the specific EFL situations. Based on the EFL situation of Iran, the participants have their own ideas about CLT, which is shown in table 7.

Table 7. CLT Factor

Sex	Assessment instrument	Communication chance	Match to situation	Match to system
Female	45	21	35	26
Male	40	25	25	20

The results suggest that despite showing keen interest in change and being eager to identify with CLT, teachers are not rather optimistic about the complete adoption of CLT, and thus feel that only by overcoming the difficulties from the above factors can teachers truly benefit from CLT in their English classrooms.

DISCUSSION

This research was designed with the purpose of finding out about teachers' understanding of CLT and how they negotiate this with the government mandated CLT curriculum. This study also investigated the teachers' attitudes and reaction in relation to CLT adoption and implementation at the junior high school level in Iran. The results of the study showed that although the teachers are aware of the CLT and its concepts, they still reported that they have teacher based classrooms and used drills.

As a corrective to the perceived shortcomings of previous language-teaching approaches, the emphasis CLT places on communication should be acknowledged. It may not be appropriate, however, to adopt the same set of principles and standards throughout the world, since "models of appropriacy vary from context to context" [2]. Lots of work needs to be done by EFL teachers and researchers on how to minimize the mismatches arising in the transfer of contexts and adapt CLT to benefit EFL learners as much as possible.

Difficulties can be overcome if the teachers are aware of the situation limits and join professional training programs [22]. For the lack of qualified teachers, in-service trainings are provided for teachers to improve their own communicative competence. These types of training can last from several days to two years. The teachers will not only learn to improve their own speaking ability, but also understand the teaching guidelines of teaching communicatively which they are provided with example syllabus. The teachers will also learn about pedagogical methods that can help them cope with students' problems in the classroom, for example, how to deal with large classes and teach communicatively, how to encourage students to speak English, or how to discover authentic materials. It is not difficult to see that CLT really require a lot of extra effort from the teachers [23].

The most important thing to do now for all EFL countries that are going through these current changes in ELT is to be aware of their own status as an EFL country that might bring to them some environmental limitations.

Given the gap between theories of communicative competence and the task confronting EFL teaching and learning, most of the previous research studies maintained that EFL countries should carefully study their English teaching situations and decide how CLT can best serve their needs and interests.

Bax appealed for the replacement of CLT as the central paradigm in language teaching with a context approach, arguing that methodology is not the sole solution. Instead, he noted, there are many different ways to learn and teach languages; the crucial determiner is the context, which includes students' learning needs, wants, styles, strategies, course books, local conditions, the classroom culture, school culture, and national culture [24].

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