

Systematic Review of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Language Education: A Balanced Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive review of communicative language teaching (CLT) in language education, considering both the positive impact of the approach and the criticisms raised by scholars. CLT has garnered significant attention in language education due to its emphasis on promoting effective communication and meaningful language use. This systematic review presents an impartial and well-rounded analysis of the pros and cons of CLT, citing previous studies in the literature review. It highlights the positive results of past research, demonstrating how CLT can enhance students' communicative competence, language proficiency, cultural awareness, learner autonomy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. However, other studies have criticized CLT, raising concerns about its lack of explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction, insufficient preparation for formal writing, standardized exams, insufficient attention to individual learner differences, and emphasis on fluency over accuracy. By presenting both perspectives, this article aims to provide educators with a balanced understanding of CLT's potential strengths and limitations, guiding them in designing effective language teaching practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The field of language teaching has experienced the creation and growth of diverse approaches over the course of its historical progression. Several approaches and methods have gained recognition in the English Language Teaching (ELT) community, including the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method, Suggestopedia, and Total Physical Response. These approaches or methods have undergone thorough examination and study by researchers and scholars. Every approach or method demonstrates specific areas of emphasis, weaknesses, and strengths, all solidly grounded in clearly defined theoretical frameworks. These approaches are frequently developed by integrating theoretical paradigms such as behaviourism, structuralism, constructivism, and universal grammar.

In this scholarly investigation, we embark on an examination of CLT, a pedagogical methodology that is subject to the same rigorous investigation as its precursors. CLT gives much value to meaning since communication is the ultimate goal of second language acquisition

(Magnan, 2007). This approach is also referred to as the notional functional strategy. It was established by the European Council in the 1970s, building on the work of language experts such as Wilkins, who analyzed the communicative meanings that a learner needs to express and understand. Instead of the traditional system of teaching grammar, he focused on meaning. For further illustration, the core idea behind CLT is that language instruction should not only focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary but also include the study of the meanings and functions of utterances in a variety of authentic contexts.

CLT is a combination of various language concepts, including sociolinguistics, functional linguistics, semantics, and pragmatics. Through the CLT approach, learners are encouraged to develop their communicative competence by using the language in meaningful and real-life situations. This approach emphasizes the importance of fluency over accuracy, making it a popular choice for language instruction in many contexts. The CLT approach, which originated in Britain, has been widely adopted in English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classrooms worldwide (Liao & Zhao, 2012; Ozsevik, 2010). This



global acceptance has been extensively documented by [Ellis \(1996\)](#). The aforementioned approach holds a crucial position within the domain of English language teaching (ELT), receiving acknowledgement from both linguists and language educators due to its pedagogical merit.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Problem

To what extent does the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) in English language teaching (ELT) contexts contribute to the development of students' language proficiency and effective communication skills, and what challenges and limitations may arise in balancing its benefits and potential drawbacks?

This research problem seeks to explore the dual nature of CLT in ELT by investigating its positive influence on language proficiency and communication skills development while also examining the challenges and limitations it may pose in terms of ensuring accuracy and addressing potential shortcomings in explicit language instruction. Understanding the overall impact of CLT on ELT will provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to optimize language teaching methods and curricula.

2.2. Research Objectives

This academic paper aims to clarify the principles and practices of the CLT approach, offering a thorough comprehension of its theoretical underpinnings and outlining its main distinguishing features. Moreover, our objective is to analyze the key benefits and constraints linked to the adoption of this instructional approach. This study serves as a vital contribution to the ongoing academic conversation on language instruction approaches, providing insightful perspectives on the dynamic nature of language education.

2.3. Research Questions

1. How does the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) in English language teaching (ELT) contexts affect the development of students' communication skills and overall language proficiency, considering its merits as a student-centered approach?
2. What challenges and limitations arise in the application of communicative language teaching (CLT) in English language teaching (ELT), particularly in terms of accuracy and potential issues related to neglecting explicit language instruction?

2.4. Data Extraction

A thorough and organized method was used to collect data in order to do a full review of all the past and present studies that looked at the pros and cons of using CLT to teach English. A comprehensive literature review of scholarly papers, journal articles, research reports, and dissertations from reputable databases and academic repositories was conducted. To assure relevance and currency, we will concentrate on studies published

between 1972 and 2023, with particular emphasis on studies from the last five decades.

The studies selected for analysis were carefully vetted based on their relevance and methodological rigor. Key findings about the pros and cons of using CLT in ELT were found by extracting data. These findings focused on things like student-centered learning, improving communication skills, implementation challenges, and possible limits in teaching language accuracy. By synthesizing the insights from these studies, a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of CLT in ELT was achieved. This way of collecting data made it possible for a fair and fact-based evaluation of CLT, which showed its good points and areas that might need more work.

3. RESULTS

The communicative language teaching approach has garnered significant attention in language education due to its stress on improving effective communication and meaningful language use. The results below provide a balanced analysis of the merits and demerits of CLT, drawing insights from past studies mentioned in the literature review.

3.1. Merits of CLT

3.1.1. Enhanced Communicative Competence and Language Proficiency

[Richards and Rodgers \(2001\)](#) highlight that the CLT approach has prioritized real-life communication as a means of developing language competencies in authentic contexts. Evidence also shows that engaging students in communication tasks and activities allows students to fine-tune their ability to transmit and interpret messages proficiently, thereby enhancing their communicative competence ([Krashen, 1981](#)). This approach has underscored oral communication and active engagement, helping students cultivate an advanced level of fluency and precision in language use. In this respect, once students practice the language, especially in meaningful contexts, their language proficiency is profoundly improved ([Savignon, 1972](#)).

Additionally, [Chaudhury \(2015\)](#) conducted a study that is in accordance with the principles of CLT. This approach focuses on the improvement of communicative competence and language proficiency. The author sought to establish an interactive learning environment wherein students could actively participate in real-life communication scenarios by implementing communicative language activities, as opposed to the conventional 'chalk and talk' approach. The above-mentioned technique is compatible with the fundamental objective of CLT, which is to impart language learning that is both meaningful and practical. The use of a quasi-experimental, non-randomized pre-test and post-test control group design enhances the study by providing a research-supported framework for assessing the true effects of communicative language activities on learners' communicative competence over a period of time. The results indicating a substantial disparity in post-test scores provide robust evidence for the efficacy of CLT-focused approaches in improving language proficiency and

communicative competence. These findings highlight the impact of Chaudhury's (2015) research in advocating for the implementation of communicative language teaching methods in language education.

3.1.2. *Fostering Learner Autonomy and Motivation*

Ellis (1999) posits that the CLT approach, grounded on the idea of learner-centeredness, endeavours to facilitate students' autonomy in assuming responsibility for their language acquisition process. Previous research has substantiated the assertion that CLT is a pedagogical technique that fosters the active participation of students, encouraging them to become engaged, creative, and self-directed learners (Long, 1996; Snider & Schnurer, 2002). In this regard, the CLT approach facilitates the development of learner autonomy by affording students increased control and responsibility in their learning process.

In order to accomplish this objective, CLT offers students opportunities to engage in authentic communicative tasks, including but not limited to role plays, debates, dialogues, and puzzles. The primary objective of these exercises is to enhance students' opportunities for verbal expression while concurrently reducing the teacher's talking time. Furthermore, when students participate in these activities, whether in pairs or groups, working together towards a common goal, they assume complete responsibility for their own educational development (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991).

3.1.3. *Development of Cultural Competence*

The CLT approach is widely recognized for its effectiveness in fostering cultural competence among language learners. This approach cultivates intercultural communication and understanding, as pointed out by Nunan (1991), and encourages learners to engage with authentic language materials from diverse cultural contexts. When students interact with their peers from different backgrounds, they develop sensitivity and awareness of different cultures, leading to a deeper understanding of the language and its cultural implications.

Research has shown that CLT enables learners to communicate more effectively in multicultural settings by understanding and respecting different cultural norms and practices (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). This approach's emphasis on authentic material and peer interaction facilitates cultural immersion and provides occasions for learners to experience different cultures firsthand. Besides, the CLT approach encourages learners to use the language in its natural context, leading to a more inclusive understanding of the language's cultural implications.

The connection of Arroussi (2014) with the concepts of communicative language teaching in relation to the promotion of cultural competency underscores the need to include culture in language instruction. The fact that the researcher saw that culture had a big effect on improving communication skills is in line with the basic ideas of CLT, which stress how important it is to use language in real, appropriate situations. From Arroussi's point of view, language learners' success in communication situations depends on how well they understand and value culture. This highlights the close connection between learning a language and communicating culturally. The above

alignment accentuates the need to integrate cultural components into language instruction approaches, cultivating a more profound grasp of the desired language and boosting learners' ability to communicate effectively.

The experimental study conducted by Hua (2011) presents persuasive evidence in favour of the relationship between the implementation of CLT and the development of cultural competence. The results of the study stress the efficacy of integrating cultural education into an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course, as it led to a notable enhancement in students' cultural consciousness and ability to communicate effectively (Wu, 2008). This is in perfect agreement with the concepts of CLT, which prioritize the incorporation of authentic cultural contexts into language acquisition in order to improve learners' proficiency in varied communication settings. Hua's (2011) study provides evidence that being exposed to and comprehending diverse cultures not only increases students' cultural awareness but also improves their communication skills, which is an ultimate principle of CLT (Lee *et al.*, 2023). These findings offer significant support for the incorporation of cultural components into language instruction, which is consistent with the comprehensive approach to language acquisition advocated by CLT. This approach aims to equip students with the necessary skills to engage in meaningful and successful cross-cultural conversation.

3.1.4. *Enhancing Critical Thinking and Problem-solving Skills*

According to a study by Hasibuan and Batubara (2012), the CLT approach is effective in improving learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The approach involves the use of communicative tasks that require learners to negotiate meaning in various contexts. By engaging in these tasks, learners are encouraged to think critically while communicating, leading to the development of cognitive abilities that extend beyond just language learning. Additionally, CLT promotes critical thinking about language itself, which can help students gain a deeper understanding of the nuances and implications of the language they are using.

Furthermore, the development of critical thinking skills and oral communication proficiency is widely recognized as a fundamental necessity in the context of 21st-century education. Numerous studies have been conducted to examine several methodologies and techniques aimed at enhancing critical thinking and oral communication abilities within the classroom setting (Halpern, 2003). Existing literature provides evidence that the incorporation of communicative language teaching practices, such as in-class debates, discussions, public-speaking exercises, and role-play activities, enhances an atmosphere conducive to understanding, introspection, inquiry, negotiation, and logical evaluation. Conversely, the implementation of critical thinking exercises in language education can help in the development of oral competency skills.

3.2. Demerits of CLT

3.2.1. Neglect of Explicit Grammar and Vocabulary Instruction

One of the primary criticisms directed at the communicative language teaching approach is its alleged neglect of explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Nassaji (2000) stresses the importance of integrating form-focused activities within an integrative approach to L2 teaching that balances meaning with form. The author argues that an overemphasis on meaning, as seen in traditional communicative language teaching, can affect learners negatively if they neglect the language structure. Consequently, to ensure the development of proficient language learners, form-focused activities should be incorporated within a communicative and meaningful context. The article provides various pedagogical strategies, such as the use of corrective feedback, explicit instruction, and consciousness-raising tasks, to help learners develop their form-focused abilities. These strategies aim to enhance learners' capacity to notice and analyze the form of language, leading to greater accuracy and fluency in language production.

Likewise, in his work, Grim (2008) places much emphasis on the significance of form, particularly for beginning-level learners and cultural lessons. The author argues that integrating language structures into cultural lessons at the early stages of French L2 classes can be more effective for learning second language grammar, vocabulary, and cultural content in intermediate French L2 classes. Grim's approach departs from traditional communicative language teaching, which gives much more value to meaning than form. Instead, Grim contends that giving equal importance to form and meaning can boost language learning outcomes.

El-Dakhs (2015) argues that without systematic and explicit instruction, students may struggle to develop a solid foundation in language structure and vocabulary knowledge. This limitation may hinder learners' ability to produce accurate and grammatically correct language. For example, the author's critique of communicative language teaching addresses significant language accuracy issues. CLT stresses meaning and communication, while El-Dakhs' research shows the risks of emphasizing meaning alone in language training. This view is supported by research that suggests pure CLT learners may lack linguistic accuracy, a key component of language mastery (Ahmad & Rao, 2013). El-Dakhs' criticism focuses on the necessity for a balanced approach to language development that includes communicative competency and formal teaching. Recognizing the importance of language accuracy allows educators to take a more holistic approach that ensures students communicate successfully and have the grammatical and linguistic precision needed for language competency. This perspective enhances CLT discourse by highlighting its benefits and weaknesses in language instruction.

3.2.2. Limited Preparation for Formal Writing and Standardized Exams

According to Bachman (1990), some researchers express concerns that the CLT approach may not provide students with sufficient preparation for formal writing and standardized exams that require precise grammar and vocabulary usage. While CLT's major focus on communicative activities is critical for effective communication, it may not fully address the intricacies required for formal language production. Consequently, students may lack the necessary skills to perform well in language assessment contexts that demand precise grammar and vocabulary usage. Furthermore, some sceptics argue against implementing CLT, as exemplified by Norland and Pruett-Said (2006). These critics express apprehension regarding the potential neglect of reading and writing abilities within the framework of CLT. They elucidate that if educators fail to instruct grammatical regulations or vocabulary, learners may ultimately experience difficulty expressing themselves clearly and effectively throughout interpersonal exchanges. Finally, a limitation of communicative language teaching is its applicability mainly to small class sizes. In the context of a large classroom, teachers may allocate an important amount of time towards assessing the language proficiency of individual students and rectifying any errors they may have made (Wilkins, 1976).

3.2.3. Prioritization of Fluency over Accuracy

While fluency is an essential component in language production, it is important to maintain a balance between fluency and accuracy. The Communicative Language Teaching approach accentuates fluency, which may contribute to the development of fossilized errors if accuracy-focused activities are neglected (Ellis, 2003). These errors could become ingrained and difficult to correct, which can negatively impact language learning. Thus, it is crucial to include accuracy-focused activities in language learning to ensure that learners are not only fluent but also accurate in their language production. Striking a balance between fluency and accuracy can help learners develop a well-rounded and effective communication skill set.

Similarly, according to Brumfit and Johnson's (1979) publication, the communicative approach to language learning, which gives emphasis to the ability to communicate effectively in a language, should not be prioritized to the detriment of language accuracy. The authors suggest that a balanced approach that incorporates both communicative competence and language accuracy is essential to achieving optimal language learning outcomes. This implies that a singular focus on communicative competence may not suffice to equip learners with the necessary language skills required for effective communication in real-life situations. As such, educators and language learners alike must strive to achieve a balance between the two approaches in order to maximize language learning outcomes.

In addition, Gerges' (2016) research regarding the potential weakness of CLT brings attention to an essential aspect of language education. Although this approach is highly effective in improving oral fluency and communicative

competence, it is essential to recognize that language proficiency encompasses more than just speaking abilities. The findings of Gerges draw attention to the significance of maintaining a balanced approach in the training of language. By placing exclusive emphasis on oral fluency, there is a possibility of unintended repercussions, including a potential decrease in the development of grammar skills and writing proficiency. This underscores the imperative for an all-inclusive strategy that incorporates both fluency and accuracy in language use.

4. DISCUSSION

Over the years, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has become increasingly popular in language education. This approach emphasizes the importance of promoting effective communication and meaningful language use in the classroom. This discussion aims to provide a broader analysis of both the merits and drawbacks of CLT, drawing upon relevant findings from the literature review mentioned above.

4.1. Research Question 1

How does the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) in English language teaching (ELT) contexts affect the development of students' communication skills and overall language proficiency, considering its merits as a student-centered approach?

4.1.1. Enhancing Communication Skills

One of the main advantages of CLT is its rigorous emphasis on honing students' communication proficiencies. This approach encourages learners to apply language skills in real-life scenarios, enabling them to develop effective communication abilities across diverse contexts. This pedagogical approach fits well with modern theories about how people learn languages, like Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981), which says that people learn languages best when they are exposed to input that is just a little bit above their current level of proficiency. This helps them communicate meaningfully.

4.1.2. Promoting Student-centered Learning

Another advantage of CLT is that it promotes student-centered learning. In a CLT classroom, the teacher acts as a facilitator who guides and supports student interactions. This approach encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, making it more engaging and motivating for them. For instance, Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) complements CLT by underscoring that interaction and negotiation of meaning during language use promote language acquisition, echoing the fundamental concept in CLT of student-centred, communicative learning. Savignon's Communicative Competence Theory (Tarone, 1983) further supports CLT's objectives by highlighting the importance of teaching language within real-life contexts, a core principle of CLT. Additionally, Hasibuan and Batubara (2012) agree with CLT's principles, confirming that this approach allows learners to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills as they collaborate with their peers. These results show that

CLT goes hand in hand with language acquisition theory, making it clear that it is a way to teach that focuses on building good communication skills.

4.2. Research Question 2

What challenges and limitations arise in the application of communicative language teaching (CLT) in English language teaching (ELT), particularly in terms of accuracy and potential issues related to neglecting explicit language instruction?

4.2.1. Difficulties in Implementation

Nevertheless, CLT is not without its limitations. One of the main criticisms of this approach is that it can be difficult to implement in practice. For instance, it can be challenging for teachers to design and manage activities that meet the diverse needs of their students. While the acceptance of CLT is widespread among educators in English-speaking nations in the Western hemisphere, its adoption in Asia and non-native English countries is not as prevalent. According to Kustati (2013), the efficacy of the strategy in Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Malaysia is limited. The degree of success observed in these nations is constrained and subject to variation based on the specific country and socio-cultural circumstances. Similarly, Koosha and Yakhabi (2013) highlight that EFL instructors encounter problems and challenges while attempting to implement the CLT approach and optimize the learning experience in their classrooms.

4.2.2. Neglecting Language Accuracy

Some research suggests potential drawbacks. For example, Spada and Lightbown's study (2008) indicates that explicit instruction, especially in grammar, can be beneficial alongside CLT. This raises questions about whether CLT, which primarily focuses on communication, might neglect the role of explicit language instruction, potentially hindering learners' language development.

To address this criticism, language learning programmes could incorporate explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction into their curriculum. Explicit instruction can help learners develop a solid foundation in language structure and vocabulary knowledge, which is essential for effective communication. According to Canale and Swain (1980), linguistic and communicative competence is an essential aspect of language instruction and acquisition, particularly in the context of ESL/EFL education. The authors further elaborate that communicative competence is predicated upon the interplay between grammatical competence and knowledge, as well as socio-linguistic competence and knowledge. In order to facilitate effective communication, it is essential to possess knowledge of the appropriate content, delivery, and timing of one's message.

In 1985, Swain put forward the Output Hypothesis, which disagrees with the receptive approach of CLT and supports active language production. This displays how significant it is to include language production activities in the CLT framework. Moreover, Nation and Newton (2009) accentuate the significance of vocabulary instruction alongside communicative activities, pointing out a

potential gap in CLT's focus on vocabulary acquisition. These criticisms reveal that CLT may need to strike a better balance between communication-centred teaching and addressing these potential limitations. To avoid such negative consequences, it is crucial to incorporate accuracy-focused activities into language learning programmes.

In short, the study of communicative language teaching (CLT) demonstrates that it fits with current theories of how people learn languages because it focuses on real communication, interaction with others, and real-life situations. The efficacy of this pedagogical technique has been demonstrated in its ability to enhance learners' communication abilities and promote a student-centered learning environment. However, it is critical to acknowledge potential constraints, such as the requirement for explicit instruction in language, the necessity for active production of language, and the acquisition of vocabulary. These factors have the potential to affect the overall effectiveness of language learning within the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary

In summary, the discourse surrounding communicative language teaching features its prominence and pertinence within the realm of language education. The CLT approach, which is based on learner-centeredness and meaningful dialogue, presents a number of benefits. This approach promotes active participation from students, facilitates the application of language in authentic contexts, and improves their ability to communicate effectively in accordance with current theories of language learning. Furthermore, the implementation of the CLT approach fosters the development of student autonomy, enhances critical thinking skills, and cultivates problem-solving ability.

However, it is imperative to recognize that CLT is not devoid of constraints. The challenges encompass obstacles encountered during the implementation process, particularly in countries where English is not the local language, as well as the possibility of disregarding language accuracy and explicit instruction. Achieving a harmonious equilibrium between pedagogical approaches that stress communication and the need to acknowledge and overcome these constraints is crucial to facilitating successful language acquisition.

5.2. Implications

The implications of the findings presented in this discourse hold substantial importance for practitioners and scholars in the field of language education. Educators ought to persist in leveraging the advantages of CLT by prioritizing the promotion of meaningful conversation, interactive engagement, and the application of language skills in authentic, real-world contexts. Yet, it is imperative for educators to take into account the incorporation of explicit language instruction, engaging language production activities, and vocabulary teaching within their

communicative language teaching methodologies. This approach is fundamental in order to effectively tackle any potential constraints and offer a comprehensive language learning experience for students.

5.3. Future Research

In order to augment our understanding of the efficacy of communicative language teaching and explore prospective avenues for development, it is recommended that future research endeavours concentrate on various domains:

1. *Comparative Studies*: Conduct comparative studies to analyze the outcomes of CLT-based instruction in comparison to other language teaching methodologies. These studies aim to measure the effectiveness of CLT in various circumstances.
2. *Language Production Activities*: Examine the effects of integrating additional language production activities inside the CLT framework. Furthermore, it seeks to explore the ideal equilibrium between the enhancement of receptive and productive language skills.
3. *Vocabulary Acquisition*: Look into new ways to teach vocabulary within the framework of communicative language teaching. The goal is to help students build a strong vocabulary foundation along with their communication skills.
4. *Teacher Training*: Examine the effects of offering teacher training programmes with an emphasis on CLT in order to enrich educators' proficiency in efficiently implementing CLT methodologies.

In conclusion, it can be argued that CLT holds significant pedagogical value. However, it is crucial to emphasize the prominence of ongoing study and adaptation in order to fully optimize its advantages and effectively address any potential limitations. This approach ultimately aims to offer learners a whole language learning experience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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