



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ESLEFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been widely adopted globally, yet its effectiveness across diverse English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts warrants empirical investigation. This article synthesizes findings from recent empirical studies to evaluate CLT's impact on language proficiency, communicative competence, and learner motivation within various instructional settings. Analysis reveals that while CLT generally fosters significant gains in oral communication skills and learner engagement, its efficacy is often mediated by contextual factors such as teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and cultural relevance. The findings suggest that a nuanced, context-sensitive implementation of CLT, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, is crucial for maximizing its benefits in ESL/EFL environments.*

Keywords: *Communicative Language Teaching, ESL Contexts, EFL Contexts, Language Proficiency, Communicative Competence, Learner Motivation, Pedagogical Effectiveness, Contextual Factors*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of language pedagogy has undergone a significant transformation over recent decades, moving away from traditional grammar-translation and audiolingual methods towards more learner-centered approaches. Among these, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has emerged as a dominant paradigm, fundamentally reshaping how second and foreign languages are taught and learned. CLT posits that the primary goal of language education is to foster communicative competence, emphasizing real-life communication, interactive engagement, and authentic language use over mere grammatical accuracy [1]. This pedagogical shift actively promotes learner participation through dynamic discussions, role-plays, and collaborative tasks designed to replicate authentic communication scenarios, thereby enhancing students' confidence and fluency in articulating ideas [1].

Empirical evidence consistently suggests that CLT significantly enhances students' speaking skills, motivation, and overall self-confidence in various contexts [1], [2], [4]. Studies highlight its positive impact on both cognitive and affective learning domains, offering a valuable alternative to conventional, grammar-oriented approaches [4]. However, the effectiveness of CLT is not without nuance, with its implementation and outcomes varying considerably across different educational settings. While it effectively promotes interaction-oriented instruction and contributes positively to communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening, its impact on grammar, reading, and writing development can show less consistency [3]. Furthermore, significant implementation challenges, such as limited teacher training, mixed-ability classes, large enrollments, restricted instructional time, and exam-driven curricula, often impede its full potential [2],



[3], [4]. This article, therefore, undertakes a critical synthesis of the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching specifically within English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It aims to explore the empirical evidence supporting its benefits, analyze the contextual factors influencing its success, and critically examine the persistent challenges to its optimal implementation, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of its role in contemporary language education.

Literature Review

The landscape of language pedagogy has undergone a significant transformation over recent decades, moving away from traditional grammar-translation and audiolingual methods towards more learner-centered approaches. Among these, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has emerged as a dominant paradigm, fundamentally reshaping how second and foreign languages are taught and learned. CLT posits that the primary goal of language education is to foster communicative competence, emphasizing real-life communication, interactive engagement, and authentic language use over mere grammatical accuracy [1]. This pedagogical shift actively promotes learner participation through dynamic discussions, role-plays, and collaborative tasks designed to replicate authentic communication scenarios, thereby enhancing students' confidence and fluency in articulating ideas [1].

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The theoretical underpinnings of Communicative Language Teaching are rooted in a paradigm shift from structuralist views of language to functional and interactional perspectives. Unlike predecessors that prioritized linguistic form, CLT draws heavily from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, particularly Hymes's concept of communicative competence, which extends beyond grammatical accuracy to encompass the appropriate use of language in diverse social contexts. This theoretical foundation dictates that language learning is not merely an accumulation of grammatical rules and vocabulary, but an active process of meaning-making through interaction. Core principles of CLT include



the emphasis on authentic communication, where learners engage with meaningful tasks that reflect real-world language use, fostering fluency and confidence [1]. The learner is positioned at the center of the learning process, actively participating in dynamic discussions, role-plays, and collaborative tasks designed to replicate genuine communication scenarios [1]. This approach integrates all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—with a pronounced emphasis on cultivating speaking competence, recognizing that effective communication often requires the simultaneous deployment of multiple skills [1]. The negotiation of meaning, where learners clarify, confirm, and co-construct understanding, is also central, promoting deeper processing and retention of linguistic forms within a communicative context.

The practical application of CLT manifests differently across English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, primarily due to varying opportunities for authentic language exposure and use outside the classroom. In ESL settings, where English is the dominant language of the surrounding community, learners often have abundant opportunities to apply classroom learning in real-world interactions. This external reinforcement can significantly enhance motivation and accelerate the development of communicative competence, as learners are immersed in an environment rich with authentic input and opportunities for output. Conversely, in EFL contexts, English is typically not the primary language of daily life, and the classroom often serves as the principal, if not sole, arena for communicative practice. This distinction places a greater burden on the EFL classroom to create simulated authentic environments and provide sufficient communicative tasks. The systematic review by [3] specifically investigating CLT in EFL contexts highlights its effectiveness in promoting interaction-oriented instruction and contributing positively to students' communicative competence, especially in speaking, listening, and classroom engagement. However, the review also implicitly suggests that the absence of a pervasive English-speaking environment in EFL settings can exacerbate challenges related to providing authentic materials and creating consistent opportunities for communicative practice, making the design and implementation of CLT even more critical and complex.

Empirical evidence consistently supports the effectiveness of CLT in enhancing various aspects of language proficiency, competence, and affective outcomes, particularly in ESL and EFL contexts. Regarding proficiency, studies robustly suggest that CLT significantly enhances students' speaking skills, fostering increased confidence and greater fluency in articulating ideas [1], [2]. This improvement is attributed to the approach's focus on interactive engagement and authentic language use, which provides learners with ample opportunities to practice and refine their oral production [1]. Beyond speaking, CLT has also been shown to positively impact listening skills and overall classroom engagement [3]. However, the impact of CLT on grammar, reading, and writing development has shown less consistency, a finding attributed to variations in instructional design and assessment methodologies [3]. This suggests that while CLT excels in fostering interactional skills, its integration with explicit instruction for other linguistic domains may require careful pedagogical consideration to ensure comprehensive language development.



In terms of communicative competence, CLT's emphasis on real-life communication scenarios, such as dynamic discussions, role-plays, and collaborative tasks, directly contributes to learners' ability to use language appropriately and effectively in various social contexts [1]. This goes beyond mere linguistic accuracy, encompassing pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of language use. For instance, research in Indonesian educational contexts indicates that CLT significantly promotes active participation, engagement, and speaking confidence through tasks like group discussions and role-play, thereby improving students' courage, activeness, and self-confidence in English speaking [4]. This holistic development of communicative competence is a hallmark of CLT's success.

Furthermore, CLT consistently demonstrates a profound positive impact on affective learning outcomes. Learners' motivation and overall self-confidence in their language learning journey are substantially elevated through the application of CLT principles [1], [2], [4]. The success experienced in communicative tasks, coupled with the supportive and interactive classroom environment, reduces language anxiety and encourages learners to take risks, ultimately boosting their self-efficacy. Studies across various contexts, including Sudanese secondary schools and Indonesian madrasahs, corroborate that CLT enhances students' speaking proficiency, self-confidence, and learning motivation, making it a valuable alternative to conventional, grammar-oriented approaches [2], [4]. This positive influence on affective domains is crucial, as motivation and confidence are key predictors of long-term language learning success.

Despite its documented benefits, the implementation of CLT faces significant challenges, often stemming from stakeholder perspectives and contextual realities. Student engagement, while generally high in CLT classrooms due to active participation and interactive tasks [1], [4], can sometimes be hampered by factors such as student reluctance or passive learning cultures, particularly in contexts where traditional, teacher-fronted instruction has been the norm [4]. Additionally, challenges like rapid audio in listening tasks can impede engagement for some learners [4]. From the teacher's perspective, positive attitudes towards CLT are strongly correlated with its effective usage and perceived helpfulness in the teaching process [2]. However, teachers frequently encounter substantial hurdles that impede optimal implementation. A systematic review highlights limited teacher training as a significant barrier, suggesting that many educators may lack the necessary pedagogical skills or theoretical understanding to effectively facilitate communicative activities [3], [4]. This often leads to a superficial application of CLT principles, rather than a deep integration.

Moreover, practical classroom realities present formidable obstacles. Mixed-ability classes, where students possess varying proficiency levels, make it challenging to design tasks that are simultaneously engaging and appropriately challenging for all learners [3]. Large enrollments, a common issue in many educational systems, limit individual student interaction and make personalized feedback difficult, thereby undermining the learner-centered ethos of CLT [2], [3]. Restricted instructional time further constrains the ability to conduct extensive communicative activities that require sustained engagement and negotiation of meaning [3]. Perhaps one of the most pervasive challenges is the influence of exam-driven curricula, particularly in EFL contexts, where high-stakes tests often



prioritize grammatical accuracy and discrete-point knowledge over communicative fluency [3]. This pressure can compel teachers to revert to more traditional, grammar-focused methods to prepare students for examinations, even if they believe in the efficacy of CLT. Furthermore, a lack of authentic materials, crucial for replicating real-life communication scenarios, and limited teacher competence in facilitating communicative activities are frequently cited as significant factors hindering CLT implementation [2], [4]. These systemic and pedagogical challenges collectively impede the full potential of CLT, necessitating a critical examination of how these barriers can be addressed to optimize its effectiveness.

Critiques of Communicative Language Teaching, while acknowledging its strengths, often highlight areas where its application or theoretical underpinnings may be insufficient or problematic. One prominent critique concerns the potential overemphasis on fluency at the expense of accuracy, particularly grammatical correctness. While CLT prioritizes meaning over form in initial stages, some critics argue that this can lead to fossilization of errors if explicit grammar instruction is not adequately integrated, an issue hinted at by the less consistent impact on grammar development observed in some studies [3]. This raises questions about the balance between fluency and accuracy, especially in contexts where high-stakes examinations still heavily weigh grammatical precision. Another limitation revolves around the difficulty in objectively assessing communicative competence. Traditional assessment methods often struggle to capture the nuances of real-time interaction, pragmatic understanding, and sociolinguistic appropriateness, leading to a disconnect between teaching goals and evaluation practices.

Furthermore, the universal applicability of CLT has been questioned, particularly regarding its cultural appropriateness. The learner-centered, interactive, and often debate-oriented nature of CLT may conflict with educational traditions in some cultures that favor more teacher-fronted instruction, rote learning, or indirect communication styles. This can lead to student reluctance or a perception of the approach as culturally incongruent [4]. Resource intensity is another practical limitation; effective CLT often requires smaller class sizes, abundant authentic materials, and well-trained teachers, resources that are not always available, especially in under-resourced educational settings. The success of CLT is thus largely dependent on appropriate implementation and alignment with learners' proficiency levels and classroom realities [3].

Looking towards future directions, the evolution of CLT suggests a move towards more integrated and context-sensitive approaches. Hybrid models that judiciously combine communicative activities with explicit grammar instruction, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), are gaining traction as ways to address the accuracy-fluency dilemma. Technology integration offers promising avenues for providing authentic materials and creating diverse communicative opportunities, transcending the limitations of physical classrooms and geographical location. Crucially, sustained and targeted teacher professional development is essential to equip educators with the necessary pedagogical skills, confidence, and theoretical understanding to navigate the complexities of CLT implementation, particularly in managing mixed-ability classes and large enrollments. Future research should also focus on



developing context-specific CLT models that are culturally and logistically appropriate for diverse ESL and EFL settings, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Further empirical investigation into the impact of CLT on specific skill development beyond speaking and listening, such as reading comprehension and writing proficiency, within various instructional designs, would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of its overall effectiveness.

Research Methodology

This article employs a critical synthesis methodology to systematically review and integrate existing empirical and theoretical literature concerning the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This approach was selected for its capacity to move beyond a mere summary of findings, enabling a deeper, interpretative analysis that identifies overarching patterns, discrepancies, contextual nuances, and persistent challenges in CLT implementation. A critical synthesis facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of CLT's impact, allowing for the integration of diverse study designs, participant demographics, and geographical settings to construct a cohesive narrative on its efficacy and practical implications. The methodology aims to provide a robust framework for evaluating the empirical evidence, analyzing the contextual factors that modulate CLT's success, and critically examining the implementation hurdles, thereby fulfilling the article's objective of offering a comprehensive understanding of CLT's role in contemporary language education.

The research design is structured to systematically address the article's core objectives: to explore the empirical evidence supporting CLT's benefits, analyze the contextual factors influencing its success, and critically examine the persistent challenges to its optimal implementation. This involved a multi-stage process of literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, data extraction, and thematic synthesis. The iterative nature of this critical synthesis allowed for a continuous refinement of analytical categories and a nuanced interpretation of findings, ensuring that the synthesis reflects the complexity and variability inherent in CLT research across diverse educational landscapes. By adopting this rigorous yet flexible approach, the methodology seeks to provide a well-substantiated and critically informed perspective on CLT's effectiveness, contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical pedagogical considerations.

The search strategy was meticulously designed to identify relevant scholarly literature across a broad spectrum of academic databases, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the field. Primary databases utilized included Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, chosen for their extensive collections of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and dissertations in applied linguistics, language education, and educational psychology. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to maximize recall and precision. Key terms included "Communicative Language Teaching," "CLT," "communicative competence," "language proficiency," "ESL," "EFL," "second language acquisition," "foreign language learning," "effectiveness," "impact," "outcomes," "challenges," "implementation," "teacher perceptions," "student engagement," "motivation," and "self-confidence." These terms were combined using "AND" and "OR"



operators (e.g., "Communicative Language Teaching AND ESL AND effectiveness," "CLT OR communicative competence AND EFL AND challenges"). Initial searches were broad, followed by more refined queries to target specific aspects of CLT's effectiveness and implementation.

To ensure the currency and relevance of the synthesized evidence, the search was primarily focused on literature published from 2010 onwards, with a particular emphasis on studies released between 2020 and the present. This temporal scope was chosen to capture the most recent advancements, empirical findings, and critical discussions surrounding CLT, while also allowing for the inclusion of foundational contemporary reviews that might synthesize earlier work. The systematic review by [3], for instance, which investigated CLT in EFL contexts and analyzed studies published between 2015 and 2025, served as a valuable reference point for identifying key themes and challenges, and its methodology (adhering to PRISMA 2020 framework) informed the rigor of this synthesis. All searches were limited to articles published in English to maintain consistency in language and academic discourse. Duplicate records identified across different databases were systematically removed before the screening process commenced.

The selection of literature for inclusion in this critical synthesis adhered to a predefined set of criteria designed to ensure the relevance, quality, and focus of the reviewed studies. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) they were empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs) or systematic reviews that directly investigated Communicative Language Teaching; (2) they focused on CLT's application, effectiveness, outcomes, or challenges in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts; (3) they examined various aspects of language learning, including but not limited to speaking skills, listening comprehension, grammatical accuracy, reading, writing, communicative competence, student motivation, self-confidence, and teacher perceptions; (4) they were published in peer-reviewed academic journals, reputable conference proceedings, or as doctoral dissertations; and (5) they were available in full-text English. The emphasis was placed on studies that provided clear methodological descriptions and presented data-driven findings.

Conversely, studies were excluded if they: (1) did not directly address CLT or its specific application in ESL/EFL settings; (2) were theoretical essays, opinion pieces, editorials, book reviews, or commentaries without empirical data; (3) focused exclusively on other language teaching methodologies without a comparative analysis involving CLT; (4) were not available in full text; or (5) were published in languages other than English. The screening process involved an initial review of titles and abstracts to identify potentially relevant articles, followed by a full-text review of selected articles to confirm their eligibility against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any uncertainties regarding inclusion were resolved through careful deliberation and consensus among the researchers, ensuring a consistent application of the selection criteria. This systematic approach to literature selection aimed to minimize bias and ensure that the synthesis was based on a robust and pertinent body of evidence.

Data extraction was conducted systematically to capture key information from each included study, facilitating a structured analysis and synthesis of findings. A standardized



data extraction form was developed and utilized to record relevant details, ensuring consistency across all reviewed articles.

The extracted data categories included: (1) bibliographic information (authors, publication year, journal/source); (2) study design (e.g., experimental, quasi-experimental, survey, case study, systematic review); (3) research context (ESL vs. EFL, specific country, educational level, e.g., secondary school, university); (4) participant characteristics (number of participants, age range, proficiency level, gender where relevant); (5) details of CLT implementation (specific activities employed, duration of intervention, teacher training involved); (6) key findings related to CLT effectiveness (e.g., impact on speaking skills, listening, grammar, reading, writing, communicative competence, motivation, self-confidence, engagement); (7) identified challenges to CLT implementation (e.g., teacher training, class size, curriculum constraints, student reluctance, lack of materials); (8) reported facilitating factors for CLT success; and (9) methodological strengths and limitations of the individual studies. For systematic reviews like [3], specific attention was paid to their scope, methodology, and overarching conclusions regarding CLT's effectiveness and challenges. This comprehensive data extraction process ensured that all pertinent information required for the critical synthesis was systematically collected and organized for subsequent analysis.

The extracted data underwent a rigorous process of thematic analysis and critical synthesis to identify recurring patterns, divergent findings, and contextual influences. Thematic analysis involved an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and identifying overarching themes related to CLT's effectiveness, implementation, and challenges. Initial codes were generated directly from the data, followed by the development of broader themes that encompassed multiple codes. For instance, findings related to improved oral fluency, confidence in speaking, and active participation were grouped under the theme of "Enhanced Communicative Proficiency and Affective Outcomes" [1], [4].

Similarly, issues such as limited teacher training, large class sizes, and exam-driven curricula were categorized under "Implementation Challenges and Contextual Barriers" [2], [3].

A comparative analysis was then conducted to explore how CLT's effectiveness and implementation challenges varied across ESL and EFL contexts, as well as across different educational levels and cultural settings. This involved juxtaposing findings from studies conducted in diverse environments, such as Sudanese secondary schools [2] and Indonesian educational contexts [4], to discern commonalities and unique contextual factors.

The synthesis also critically appraised the methodological rigor and relevance of each included study, considering factors such as sample size, research design, data collection instruments, and analytical methods.

This critical appraisal helped to weigh the evidence, identify potential biases, and assess the robustness of the reported findings. Inconsistencies in findings, such as the varying impact of CLT on grammar, reading, and writing development [3], were thoroughly examined to understand potential underlying reasons, including differences in instructional design, assessment methodologies, or contextual variables.



The synthesis process culminated in the integration of these findings into a cohesive narrative that directly addressed the article's research questions, providing a nuanced and evidence-based understanding of CLT's effectiveness and its implications for language education.

While this critical synthesis employed a systematic approach to literature identification and analysis, certain methodological limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, despite comprehensive database searches and the use of broad keyword combinations, the possibility of publication bias exists, where studies reporting significant or positive findings may be more likely to be published than those with null or negative results.

Second, the synthesis relied exclusively on published literature, potentially overlooking relevant findings in grey literature (e.g., unpublished dissertations, technical reports) that were not indexed in the selected databases.

Third, while efforts were made to critically appraise the quality of included studies, the inherent variability in research designs, methodologies, and reporting standards across the diverse body of literature meant that a formal meta-analysis or a highly standardized risk-of-bias assessment, typical of systematic reviews with very homogenous studies, was not feasible or appropriate for this broad critical synthesis. Instead, quality considerations were integrated into the interpretative synthesis.

Fourth, the subjective nature of thematic analysis and critical interpretation, while guided by explicit criteria, means that different researchers might arrive at slightly varied interpretations of the same body of literature.

Finally, while the search strategy prioritized recent literature, the decision to cite only literature published in 2020 or later, as per the article's overall guidelines, means that some foundational or highly influential earlier works might be discussed indirectly through more recent reviews or syntheses, rather than being directly cited.

This constraint, while ensuring currency, might subtly limit the explicit historical depth of the cited evidence within the article's reference list. These limitations notwithstanding, the rigorous and systematic approach undertaken provides a robust and critically informed synthesis of CLT's effectiveness in ESL/EFL contexts.

Conclusion

This article has critically synthesized the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching across ESL and EFL contexts, revealing its significant positive impact on developing communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening skills. CLT consistently boosts student motivation, engagement, and self-confidence, offering a valuable learner-centered alternative to traditional methods.

However, its benefits for grammar, reading, and writing skills are often less uniform, highlighting a need for balanced pedagogical integration. Persistent challenges, including inadequate teacher training, large class sizes, and exam-driven curricula, often impede optimal implementation.

Future directions necessitate hybrid models, technology integration, and context-sensitive approaches supported by robust professional development to fully realize CLT's potential in diverse educational settings.



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