



## Examining the Discrepancy between the Communicative Language Teaching Approach and Educational Practices in the EFL Context of Iran: Challenges to Classroom Implementation

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### Abstract

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a method that emphasizes interaction and real-life communication in the teaching and learning process. This approach fosters a more engaging and practical learning environment by encouraging learners to actively and meaningfully use the target language in authentic contexts. This mixed-methods research aimed to explore the inconsistency between CLT and educational realities in the EFL context of Iran. It also sought to identify the factors that influence the gap between the communicative approach and educational practice in Iran. The study involved 30 university EFL/TEFL instructors from three universities in Iran. The participants' ages ranged from 29 to 54, and they were selected through convenience non-random sampling by the researcher from Azad University of Tabriz, Azad University of Tehran, South Branch, and Seraj University of Tabriz. Data were collected using the CLT questionnaire and interview questions. The analysis of the data revealed that 93.3% of teachers agreed with the student-centered and interactive nature of CLT; however, they expressed some reservations regarding its implementation in specific settings, such as large classes. While they supported the underlying principles of this teaching method, their classroom experiences showed hesitations about applying it in practice. Furthermore, interview responses indicated that contextual factors, curriculum design, assessment methods, learner-related issues, and a lack of sufficient training among teachers were the main constraints hindering implementation. The findings suggest that successful CLT implementation in Iranian higher education requires greater alignment among teacher training, classroom conditions, and assessment practices.

*Keywords:* communicative language teaching, educational practices, challenges, classroom implementation

### 1 Introduction

The advancements in modern science and technology are progressively transforming the world into a global community, facilitating frequent interactions among individuals from diverse regions. The phenomenon of globalization is also evident in the widespread use of the English language. English holds significant importance across various domains: education, science,

technology, politics, and trade. Consequently, numerous Asian nations, where English is taught as a foreign language, have transitioned from traditional instructional methods to those centered on communication. This approach is known as CLT. CLT is widely recognized as a language teaching methodology (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is founded on the premise that the primary purpose of language is communication, making its main objective the development of learners' communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In essence, the aim is to utilize real-life scenarios that require communication.

Richards (2006) notes that the CLT approach represents a departure from conventional lesson structures, which prioritized the mastery of grammatical elements and practice through controlled activities such as memorizing dialogues and drills. Instead, CLT emphasizes pair-work activities, role plays, group tasks, and project-based learning. Activities appropriate for a CLT classroom should align with the principles of a communicative teaching methodology. Nikbakht et al. (2023) point out that one key objective of CLT is to enhance fluency in language use. Fluency involves the natural use of language that occurs when a speaker participates in meaningful interactions and maintains clear and ongoing communication, even with limitations in their communicative skills. Fluency is cultivated by designing classroom activities that require students to negotiate meaning, employ communication strategies, rectify misunderstandings, and strive to prevent communication breakdowns. Furthermore, Littlewood (1981) categorizes communicative activities into two primary types: functional communicative activities and social interaction activities. Functional communication activities necessitate that students utilize their linguistic resources to bridge an information gap or address a problem. In contrast, social interaction activities require learners to be mindful of context and the roles of the participants, considering aspects such as formal versus informal language. Such activities encompass conversations, discussions, dialogues, role plays, debates, improvisations, and various simulation exercises.

Conversely, CLT has certain issues as the term can signify different things for different individuals, and regular classroom practices may vary considerably when CLT principles are implemented in diverse social and educational settings. Therefore, CLT can be regarded as a broad term that represents a shift in perspective regarding the aims and processes of language learning in the classroom (Inamov & Holmatova, 2025), encompassing various interpretations of how this can be put into practice. Central to all aspects of CLT, however, is the transition from teaching language as isolated linguistic elements to instructing individuals on how to utilize language effectively for communication, essentially shifting from teaching linguistic competence to communicative competence. Communicative competence fundamentally implies that teaching students to construct grammatically correct sentences alone is insufficient; they must also learn to use language appropriately in multiple contexts.

Thus, the primary aim of CLT is to educate learners in practical language use. The communicative approach, or CLT, encompasses a set of beliefs that not only evaluates which components of language should be taught but also signifies a shift in focus concerning teaching methodology. The pedagogical aspect of the CLT approach, as outlined by Harmer (2000), is closely linked to the notion that language learning progresses naturally and that abundant exposure to the language in practical contexts and ample opportunities for its use are crucial for a student's development of knowledge and skills. However, achieving this is often more challenging than it

sounds. Despite CLT now being a widely accepted umbrella term for learning sequences that aim to enhance students' communication abilities, it has faced significant criticism from various quarters. As previously noted, CLT begins with a theory of language as a means of communication, with the ultimate objective being to cultivate learners' communicative competence. According to Hewings (2001), in the context of CLT, meaning holds the utmost importance.

Larsen-Freeman (2003) states that a key feature of CLT is that nearly all activities are carried out with the intention of communication. Numerous studies have explored CLT innovations in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Many suggest that EFL teachers often struggle to implement CLT effectively. For example, research by Suhartami and Amin (2023) found that teachers faced challenges in applying CLT. These difficulties stem from factors such as the broader curriculum context, reliance on traditional teaching methods, large class sizes and tight schedules, limited resources and equipment, the low status of teachers focusing on communicative rather than analytical skills, and teachers' own shortcomings in oral English as well as sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Various other studies have also indicated that it is quite challenging for EFL teachers to use CLT as a tool to achieve the ultimate goals of language teaching within their specific contexts and with their students. A study examining the attitudes of educators in Hong Kong toward CLT, conducted by Chau and Chung (1987), revealed that teachers used CLT only occasionally because it demanded too much preparation time.

Inamov and Holmatova (2025) explain that teachers take on different roles in the classroom, ranging from a controller to a facilitator. A controller teacher leads the class from the front, managing everything like a puppeteer, while a facilitator takes a more background role, enabling students to accomplish tasks independently. Between these two extremes, Harmer (2007) identifies other roles teachers may assume, including controller, assessor, organizer, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and investigator. The specific roles depend largely on the lesson type and the teaching approach chosen. As assessors, teachers evaluate students' work to determine their performance levels and organize feedback and corrections accordingly.

Despite its widespread theoretical acceptance, CLT remains difficult to implement in many EFL settings because of contextual barriers such as large class sizes, limited resources, exam-oriented instruction, and insufficient teacher preparation (e.g., Hasan, 2024). One of the most important challenges is that the application is burdened by the cultural diversity in learning. In fact, CLT usually triggers small classes to promote optimum discussions. Another problem is the lack of training and resources for both the teachers and the students. Sabrina (2020) emphasizes that some teachers who were not perfectly prepared for the CLT approach in the teaching process, as a consequence, have little knowledge and teaching skills about CLT. Yet another point is the lack of an English environment, which becomes another obstacle. In the EFL context of Iran, as Khatib and Ashoori Tootkaboni (2017) state, along with general positive perceptions with respect to the implementation of CLT, some problems hinder its full growth and enhancement in most educational settings. The incompatibility between the EFL home culture and that of the originating culture is one important problem. A look at the literature indicates that various lines of research have addressed English teachers' perspectives toward CLT.

Several studies in the Iranian EFL context have reported positive attitudes toward CLT and its classroom potential (see, for e.g., Akramy et al., 2024; Banafi, 2023) that have illustrated the positive

outcomes of implementation of CLT and also positive attitudes of the participants towards CLT. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there had been no studies that considered the differences between the CLT and the real educational practices in the EFL context of Iran, considering the actual application of the approach in the classroom context. Despite language policies and the apparent need, research studies and media reports consistently claim that graduating students lack basic awareness of English grammar structures, lack confidence in their ability to use the language, and cannot speak in English (Alam & Uzzaman, 2018; Ali & Walker, 2014; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). In addition, there might exist shortages of research on teachers' way of teaching after introducing the CLT method in the context of Iran. That is why it was important to note how implementing this method in the Iranian social-cultural context can be done without considerable problems. Accordingly, this study aimed to examine the gap between CLT principles and actual instructional practices in the Iranian EFL context, with particular attention to the obstacles that hinder classroom implementation.

The implementation of CLT in English language classrooms has been widely advocated; however, its practical application often encounters significant challenges (Hasan, 2024). One of the primary obstacles lies in the adaptation of CLT to diverse cultural and educational contexts, which can hinder its effectiveness. According to Chen and Zhang (2002), core CLT activities such as group work and communicative tasks frequently face difficulties in real classroom settings. As a result, reducing class sizes is often necessary to facilitate meaningful interaction and engagement. Another critical issue is the lack of adequate training and resources for both teachers and learners. Sabrina (2020) highlights that many educators are not sufficiently familiar with the principles and methodologies of CLT, which limits their ability to implement it effectively. Additionally, the limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom environment further complicates the development of communicative competence. In the context of Iran, studies have generally reported positive attitudes toward CLT among both teachers and students (Khatib & Tootkaboni, 2017).

Despite this, the full integration of CLT into Iranian classrooms has remained a challenge. A key factor is the cultural disparity between the learners' native environment and the English-speaking world, which can impede the authentic use of the language. While some research in Iran has demonstrated the potential benefits of CLT, including improved learner engagement and positive attitudes (e.g., Akramy et al., 2024), a noticeable gap has persisted between the theoretical foundations of CLT and its practical application. Despite the inclusion of communicative approaches in official curricula, many students continue to struggle with grammatical accuracy, speaking fluency, and confidence in using English (Ali & Walker, 2014; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Moreover, there has been a lack of comprehensive research on how Iranian teachers actually implement CLT in their classrooms. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the extent to which CLT is applied in Iranian English language classrooms and to identify the factors that hinder its effective implementation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 History of CLT**

The theoretical framework of the present study is connected to CLT. This approach emphasizes using language in real-life situations, interacting with others, and helping students use language effectively in different contexts. Emerging in the 1970s, CLT marked a shift away from structurally oriented methods that emphasized grammatical accuracy over meaningful communication.

Instead, it emphasized good speaking, having real talks, and using language naturally instead of just remembering rules and practicing patterns (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Yusuf, 2008). This method emphasizes the importance of being able to communicate well. It suggests that textbooks and materials should help students use language in everyday situations, complete tasks, and learn in a way that meets their needs.

At that time, language specialists didn't prefer older ways of teaching, like audiolingual and grammar-translation methods. These methods paid a lot of attention to grammar rules and vocabulary, but they did not help students communicate effectively in real-life situations outside of school (Celce-Murcia et al., 1997). Hymes (1972) developed this new idea in response to the criticisms of Linguistic Competence by Noam Chomsky, a renowned American linguist. Chomsky (1957) believed that old ideas about language didn't account for a key part of language, which is the ability to make new and different sentences. In Chomsky's idea, there are two main parts: the knowledge of a language, called linguistic competence, and how we use that language when we talk or write, which is called linguistic performance. In the communicative approach, students learn to follow grammar rules to create correct sentences. They also learn when and where to use those sentences and who to talk to. According to Savignon (2007), the primary goal of CLT is to help students speak and interact with others to improve their communication skills. Mangubhai (2006) referred to the main ideas of CLT. These principles emphasize meaningful language use, fluency alongside accuracy, learner participation, collaborative work, authentic materials, and the teacher's role as facilitator rather than sole authority."

Many textbooks and learning programs worldwide use the communicative approach, which has a solid plan and good ideas. However, many studies show that it is difficult to use this method in EFL classrooms (Li, 1998). Many teachers say they support this new way of teaching, but they usually use a more traditional method in their classrooms. Larsen-Freeman (2000) point out the problems that a communicative method faces when teaching English to non-native speakers.

## **2.2 Activities in a CLT Classroom**

Richards and Rodgers (2001) say that the CLT approach moves away from old teaching methods that mainly taught grammar rules and involved memorizing conversations and exercises. Instead, it focuses on doing activities like working in pairs, acting out roles, working in groups, and completing projects. The activities in a CLT classroom should support the ideas of talking and communicating. One of the central aims of CLT is to promote fluency by engaging learners in meaningful interaction. Fluency is when someone can speak a language smoothly in conversations, even if they make some errors or face challenges. They can still talk and continue the chat. Fluency develops when students take part in classroom activities that help them understand one another, find ways to communicate, solve any confusion, and avoid communication problems. Littlewood (1981) also divides communication activities into two types: activities for sharing information and activities for socializing. Functional communication activities help students use their language skills to complete missing details or solve problems. When people are talking to each other, learners should pay attention to what's happening and who is there. They should also notice if the language is formal or casual. These activities involve talking, discussing, pretending to be different people, debating, making things up on the spot, and other practice tasks.

### **2.3 The Advantages of CLT**

A major advantage of CLT is its potential to enhance learners' communicative fluency in everyday contexts. Instead of focusing heavily on grammar rules and memorization, CLT emphasizes speaking and using the language in everyday situations. This way of teaching helps students to talk to one another, share their ideas, and respond to things that happen in real life. This helps them feel more sure about speaking (Hakami, 2025). The main idea of CLT is that it focuses on real communication instead of just doing language exercises. Instead of only practicing sentences by themselves, students take part in discussions, pretend to be different characters, and work together to find solutions. This helps them use the language in real-life events. This focus on talking helps them handle social situations, understand each other more, and adjust how they speak based on what's going on around them. As a result, students learn grammar and how to use language correctly. This helps them understand conversations better, which is important for good communication.

Also, CLT helps students speak more easily because they practice with real talks and fun activities. By making learners less scared of making mistakes and concentrating more on understanding rather than always being correct, this teaching method makes learning more fun and enjoyable. Students who learn through talking are more likely to speak up and understand conversations better in real life (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003). For this reason, CLT is often regarded as a useful approach for preparing learners to participate in real-world communicative situations

Another key part of the CLT approach is that it puts the learners first. Instead of teachers being the main information providers, students actively participate in their own learning. In contrast to regular teaching, where the teacher is in control, CLT allows students to take control of their own learning. It encourages discussion and teamwork, helping students take charge of improving their language skills. This method emphasizes using language in real-life situations, which makes learners feel more confident and eager to use it in their daily lives (Dos Santos, 2020). Additionally, CLT is that it emphasizes learning by doing tasks and using real materials to help people learn the language better. Unlike old methods that use prepared scripts and fake exercises, CLT uses real texts, videos, and practical activities that show how people really use language in their daily lives. Things like newspaper articles, podcasts, interviews, and everyday talks help learners understand how the language they are studying sounds, the words used, and the cultural differences. This method makes students more motivated and involved because they can see how what they're learning connects to real-life conversation (Qurbonova, 2025).

### **2.4 Problems of Implementing CLT in the Classroom Context**

Using CLT can be hard, especially in EFL classes. One big problem is that teachers need a lot of training and help to do their jobs properly. Richards and Rodgers (2001) say that teachers who are used to traditional teaching may have a hard time using CLT. This is because CLT requires teachers to adjust their teaching and their views on learning a language. Sometimes, teachers have trouble leading activities that students do on their own or handling discussions in classes with different types of students.

The classroom size and the mix of students can make it difficult to use CLT well. Large class sizes, common in many places where English is taught to non-native speakers, can make it difficult for teachers to give each student enough opportunities to practice speaking and communicating well.

Qurbonova (2025) says it's difficult to manage group activities and ensure all students participate when there are too many students in a classroom. Having students with different language skills in the same class can lead to issues. Students who are good at the language might dominate conversations, making it difficult for those who are less confident to participate.

Cultural differences can make it tough to use CLT in some areas where people are learning EFL. Larsen-Freeman (2000) says that in schools where students mostly memorize facts and listen to teachers, people may not agree with the student-focused method of CLT. In these situations, students might feel uncomfortable because they are not getting enough lessons. They may prefer a simpler way to learn. Different cultures have their own special ways of talking, like hinting instead of being direct or trying to stay away from arguments. This can change how students understand and finish their work in class.

CLT emphasizes good speaking skills rather than proper grammar. Some people say this can lead to talks that are simple to follow but not grammatically correct. Hakami (2025) says that being able to speak smoothly is important, but it is also very important to focus on grammar, especially in formal language tests. In some areas where people learn English as a second language, concentrating too much on testing grammar and correctness can make it tough for teachers and students to practice speaking fluently. Research shows that CLT has many benefits, such as helping students participate, speak more smoothly, and stay interested. But it also has some big problems, like teaching teachers, running the classroom, handling cultural differences, and balancing good speaking with being correct. To use CLT well in English classes, we have to face a few problems. This means that we need to train teachers well, keep class sizes manageable, understand student differences, and change teaching methods to match the local culture.

## **2.5 CLT in the EFL Context of Iran**

Recent studies in Iran suggest a gradual shift from grammar-focused instruction toward greater incorporation of communicative principles in textbooks and classroom. Researchers like Abdolhosseinzadeh Amini and Rahimi (2024), and Kaviani (2023) are discovering that schools are beginning to add ideas from CLT to their national teaching programs and textbooks. This means they are changing from old ways that emphasize grammar and translation, and are now focusing more on helping students to talk and learn actively. Teachers are working to incorporate real-life communication tasks, engaging activities in class, and practical projects into their lessons. But they have problems like stress from tests and large class sizes. Researchers emphasize the importance of adapting educational materials to align with Iran's culture, teachers' perspectives, and teaching methods. They say that it's not enough to just create rules; teachers also need training, and schools need resources. In general, changes to what is taught in schools are happening slowly, and teachers are becoming more willing to use teaching methods that emphasize communication. But they have problems because they need to take tests and don't have enough resources (e.g., Kaviani, 2023).

TBLT is a helpful method to apply CLT in classrooms. Research considers how organizing tasks, their order, and matching them with language goals affects outcomes like speaking fluency, communication skills, and students' ability to learn on their own (e. g, Naseri, 2024; Shabani & Heidari, 2023). The results show that well-structured TBLT lessons, along with teacher training and good assessment methods, can help students work better together and increase their motivation. The written information highlights some problems, like teachers not having enough experience in making

tasks, needing ongoing training, and the gap between task-based learning activities and regular tests. Many studies highlight the importance of creating activities that honor Iranian classroom traditions while promoting genuine communication (for instance, Shokpour, 2024; Sokhanvar et al., 2025)

Researchers want to see how well CLT and TBLT work in classrooms over time. They also want to understand what teachers think and believe, who they are, and how ready they are to use these teaching methods (Valizadeh & Sabeki, 2025). Policy changes, key tests, differences between cities and countryside, and the availability of resources all influence how CLT is used. To be successful in the long run, the lessons, teaching methods, and tests need to connect well. Teachers should get a lot of training, and the activities should be suited to the local situation (Shabani, 2023).

## 2.6 Empirical Background of the Study

Across Iran and comparable EFL contexts, previous research has reported three recurring patterns: positive teacher attitudes toward CLT, limited classroom enactment, and the constraining influence of exams, large classes, and insufficient training. A study by Ashoori Tootkaboni and Khatib (2017) looked at what 242 Iranian English language learners think about how effective CLT is and the difficulties it has. The data analysis found that some participants disagreed with the ideas of CLT, but many others liked it and thought positively about it. This means that many people in the EFL context of Iran are willing to use CLT.

Alghamdi (2021) did a study on how CLT is used in English classes in Saudi Arabia. He thought that this method should be used carefully, taking into account the local education circumstances. He said that for group work to be truly effective, it is important to focus on a few key things. They talked about how the lessons are set up, teaching training for teachers, how to run the classroom, and how students feel about working in groups and joining in. He emphasized that it's important to think about what students feel about the CLT approach so we can decide if we should use it and make changes to meet their needs.

In a study by Rezai et al. (2025), they made and tried out a survey to discover the problems that Iranian English teachers had. They discovered that the biggest problems were not enough teacher training, cultural differences, and rules from schools that made it difficult to use real conversations in teaching. Most teachers in Iran liked the idea of CLT, but a study by Jafari and Rahimi (2024) showed that there was a big difference between what they thought and how they actually taught. In reality, they mostly stuck to old methods that centered on grammar and made the teacher the main authority.

Khojasteh et al. (2023) explored how technology supports CLT. It found that even with some progress, issues like not having enough proper resources and teaching help made it difficult to do CLT effectively. These ongoing issues, along with strict rules for what to teach and large class sizes, made it difficult to use teaching methods that focus on communication in Iranian classrooms. Additionally, Sharifi Feriz et al. (2025) showed that there is a difference between how teachers teach and what students really need for good communication. This makes it harder to use CLT.

The same challenges occur in similar educational situations in EFL settings. For example, a study by Nugroho and Atmojo (2022) in Indonesia showed that many teachers and schools were struggling to help use Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in high schools. These patterns suggest that to effectively link CLT theory with classroom practice, teachers require ongoing training, lessons tailored to the local context, and enhanced support systems.

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Zendah (2025) conducted a study of English teachers in Gaza during a period of curriculum change. The results showed that teachers appreciated key aspects of CLT, such as a focus on speaking and interaction. They didn't fully understand learner-centered teaching or how to balance grammar instruction. Teachers often reverted to older methods because they lacked sufficient resources and were focused on test results. This mirrors problems seen in teaching English as a foreign language in Iran, such as strict lesson plans and cultural resistance to giving students more freedom in how they learn (see Asadi & Amani, 2025).

In Bangladesh, Rahman et al. (2025) examined how prepared EFL teachers were as CLT became more popular over the last 25 years. The study found that the teachers did not get enough training, so they did not completely understand useful teaching methods like hands-on activities and role-playing. Even though there is backing for new teaching methods, using old ways like memorizing makes it harder for them to succeed in the classroom. This is like the issues Iran has with helping teachers and adjusting to what people in the area need.

### 3 Research Questions

Meticulously considering the literature and to meet the objectives of the study, this research aimed to answer the following research questions to fill the gaps in the research literature:

1. What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the applicability of CLT in their teaching context?
2. What factors contribute to the gap between CLT principles and classroom practice in the Iranian EFL context?

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Design

The present study adopted the mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed separately, then merged during the interpretation phase to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The quantitative strand involved the administration of a closed-ended questionnaire to the university instructors, while the qualitative strand relied on interviews with a purposively selected subset of participants. This design was selected because it allows researchers to corroborate findings across data sources, offset the inherent limitations of either strand alone, and generate a more nuanced and trustworthy account of the research problem. Data collection took place during the first half of the 1403–1404 academic year across three Iranian universities, namely Azad University (Tabriz branch), Islamic Azad University (South Tehran branch), and Seraj University (Tabriz), Iran.

### 4.2 Participants

This mixed-methods study was carried out with the participation of 60 male and female teachers. The age range of the participants was between 29 and 54. These participants were selected through convenience non-random sampling from Azad University, Tabriz branch, Tehran Azad University south branch, and Tabriz Seraj University, Iran. This sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings. This approach is quick, inexpensive, and practical for exploratory or pilot studies, but it can introduce bias and limit how well findings generalize to the broader population.

To mitigate issues, researchers should be transparent about limitations and, if possible, combine it with other sampling methods or collect covariate data to assess sample differences. All participants were university instructors teaching in EFL or TEFL programs. The years of teaching experience varied between 2 to 15 years. All the participants were native speakers of the Azari and Persian languages.

### **4.3 Instruments**

In order to meet the objectives of the study, the CLT questionnaire developed by Karavas-Doukas (1996) and interview questions designed by the researcher and finalized based on the expert views were used.

#### **4.3.1 CLT Questionnaire**

A 24-item questionnaire developed by Karavas-Doukas (1996) was used to explore teachers' perceptions of key aspects of CLT. The instrument included statements related to group work, error correction, the role of grammar, student input, and teacher responsibilities. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Prior to the main study, the questionnaire was piloted with 20 conveniently selected teachers to assess its reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated as .93, indicating high internal consistency. Although the instrument is over two decades old, its core constructs remain relevant to contemporary CLT practices, and it has been widely used in previous studies (e.g., Khatib & Tootkaboni, 2017; Sabrina, 2020), ensuring the validity and comparability of the findings.

#### **4.3.2 Semi-structured Interview**

Twenty participants were interviewed to explore the factors contributing to the discrepancy between CLT principles and classroom practice, addressing the second research question. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted with participants' consent. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Using NVivo software, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and themes in the data. To ensure inter-rater reliability, two independent coders analyzed a subset of the transcripts. The coding focused on thematic categories derived from the research questions. The level of agreement between the two coders was measured using Cohen's Kappa, which yielded a score of 0.87 (based on 20 valid cases), indicating strong inter-rater reliability. The interview questions were developed based on a review of similar studies and organized around five main themes: contextual limitations, curriculum requirements, student-related challenges, gaps in teacher training, and major implementation barriers. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' perceptions of these barriers and potential solutions related to CLT implementation. Transcripts were imported into NVivo for thematic coding and analysis.

### **4.4 Procedure**

The study was a mixed-methods research. It began with getting ready to check that all the tools were good to use, and it followed the right ethical rules. Data was gathered gradually during the first half of the 1403-1404 academic year at Azad University in Tabriz, Azad University in Tehran (South branch), and Seraj University in Tabriz. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants. These forms explained that joining the study was optional, their information would be kept secret, and they could decide to leave the study at any

time. The researcher created a WhatsApp group and added the participants. The Karavas-Doukas (1996) CLT questionnaire was created by the researcher using Google Docs. The link was sent to the group, and everyone was told to finish the questionnaire in a week. Before handing out the questionnaire, the participants received clear instructions by sending a voice message to the group.

After administering the questionnaire, the researcher asked participants to complete it within a week. Then, 20 professors and instructors with very different opinions (on grammar and fluency) were selected. The researcher carefully chose these professors for interviews to find out what might be going wrong with the implementation. They were contacted by phone and given the option to set up the interviews in English. They could decide not to take part in this part of the study. Each interview lasted about 30 to 45 minutes and was held in the professors' offices at the universities. The researcher spoke with 8 of them online using Google Meet because they were teachers at the South branch of Tehran, and the researcher couldn't meet them face-to-face. A time was set for them to do it. She explained the goal and six questions for this part of the study before asking anything. She arranged a video call where she asked one question at a time and listened for answers. She recorded the interviews so she could listen again later and identify the main points. Before each call, she reminded everyone to be ready at the agreed time.

All semi-structured interviews began by connecting with the person being interviewed and asking if it was okay to record the talk. They followed a plan devised by the researcher, which focused on five key areas: the problems in the situation, the demands of the curriculum, the difficulties learners face, the training of teachers, and possible solutions. The researcher wrote down the recordings within 100 hours and listened to them again to check for mistakes. She also asked an expert in the EFL context to check the data for inter-rater reliability. The raw questionnaire data were entered into SPSS version 26, where any strange answers or missing information were considered (none were found). The interview transcripts were added to NVivo for thematic analysis. In the first step, open codes on different topics, such as having large class sizes were considered. Next, they were grouped into larger ideas, like pressures from testing. In the end, everything was linked to the research questions. Thematic analysis was conducted manually by the researchers, with software-based visualizations used only for supplementary exploration. Later, inter-rater reliability, that refers to the situation where a second expert independently checks the data to see if there is an agreement with the researcher's findings was used ( $Kappa = 0.87$ ).

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

The gathered quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Software, version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used for a 24-question CLT questionnaire (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .930$ ). Also, NVivo software was used to look at the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis. This involved three steps: first, open coding to find initial patterns, second, axial coding to group themes, and third, selective coding to clarify the main factors affecting the gap in CLT practices (inter-rater  $Kappa = .870$ ).

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores for each questionnaire item. High means (e.g., Item 9:  $M = 4.32$ , 93.3% agreement on group work exploration; Item 8:  $M = 4.23$ , 92.5% on learner-centered responsibility) indicated strong theoretical endorsement, while lower scores (e.g., Item 21:  $M = 3.42$ ; Item 1:  $M =$

3.32) highlighted implementation hesitations, supplemented by frequency distributions and percentages for detailed item-level insights.

For the second research question, 20 interviews were analyzed through qualitative data analysis and organized into themes using NVivo software. The transcripts were divided into important parts and labeled in a general way. These were then organized into four main themes: issues related to the environment and resources, pressures from the curriculum and assessments, challenges faced by learners, and gaps in teacher training. Themes were compared and contrasted against quantitative paradoxes for integrated interpretation.

## 5. Results

To answer the first research question exploring how teachers recognize the applicability of the CLT in Iranian EFL context, the results obtained from questionnaire were subjected to descriptive statistics. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's Alpha. Table 1 shows the reliability statistics of the questionnaire.

**Table 1**

*Reliability Statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.930	.929	24

The reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be .93, which is quite satisfactory. Table 2 illustrates the results of the teachers' perception of the applicability of the CLT.

**Table 2**

*Teachers' Perception of the Applicability of the Communicative Approach*

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
1. Grammatical correctness is one of the criteria to judge the learner's performance.	8.3 %	29.2 %	10.0 %	26.7 %	25.8 %	3.32	0.91
2. Group work activities are essential	--	.8 %	10.8 %	53.3 %	35.0 %	4.22	0.75
3. Grammar is a means rather than an end.	.8 %	1.7 %	11.7 %	62.5 %	23.3 %	4.05	0.77
4. Learners can suggest the content and activities of the lesson	--	2.5 %	11.7 %	56.7 %	29.2 %	4.12	0.78
5. Training learners to take responsibility for their own learning.	.8 %	1.7 %	15.0 %	47.5 %	35.0 %	4.14	0.76
6. The teachers' feedback must be focused on the appropriateness	.8 %	2.5 %	21.7 %	54.2 %	20.8 %	3.91	0.81
7. The teacher is no longer only an 'authority' or 'instructor.'	.8 %	3.3 %	13.3 %	59.2 %	23.3 %	4.00	0.78
8. The learner-centered approach to LT encourages responsibility	--	2.5 %	5.0 %	47.5 %	45.0 %	4.23	0.72

9. Group work allows students to explore problems	.8 %	2.5 %	3.3 %	50.0 %	43.3 %	4.32	0.69
10. Errors are a natural part of learning language	--	4.2 %	14.2 %	58.3 %	23.3 %	4.00	0.80
11. Organizing the teaching so as to suit the needs of all is impossible in a large class	--	1.7 %	11.7 %	51.7 %	35.0 %	4.20	0.74
12. Knowledge of the rules of a language is not sufficient	--	2.5 %	14.2 %	64.2 %	19.2 %	4.00	0.79
13. Group work activities are practical	--	8.3 %	13.3 %	49.2 %	29.2 %	3.99	0.82
14. Much correction is wasteful of time	.8 %	9.2 %	18.3 %	52.5 %	19.2 %	3.80	0.84
15. CLT learners are fluent and accurate.	.8 %	6.7 %	10.8 %	58.3 %	23.3 %	3.96	0.81
16. The teacher has many different roles while teaching	--	2.5 %	21.7 %	56.7 %	19.2 %	3.92	0.85
17. Mastering the rules of grammar is not enough	--	2.5 %	15.0 %	68.3 %	14.2 %	3.94	0.83
18. Language as a vehicle for doing something is more effective	2.5 %	12.5 %	20.0 %	50.0 %	15.0 %	3.62	0.87
19. Activities such as explanations, writing and examples are not the only role of the teachers	.8 %	7.3 %	18.3 %	50.2 %	23.3 %	3.80	0.84
20. Tasks and activities should be based on the students' needs	.8 %	15.8 %	15.0 %	44.2 %	24.2 %	3.75	0.88
21. Small group work can replace whole class and formal instruction	2.5 %	15.0 %	29.2 %	44.2 %	9.2 %	3.42	0.90
22. Through Group work the teacher can monitor the students' performance	8.3 %	29.2 %	10.0 %	26.7 %	25.8 %	3.32	0.91
23. To communicate effectively, direct instruction in the rules and terminology of grammar is NOT essential	--	5.8 %	11.7 %	52.5 %	30.0 %	4.06	0.87
24. The teacher must supplement the textbook with other materials and tasks	--	2.5 %	6.7 %	56.7 %	34.2 %	4.18	0.74

Table 2 presents the frequency, percentage, and mean analysis of Iranian teachers' recognition of the applicability of the CLT approach. The results indicate a teaching body that is largely convinced of CLT's core philosophical tenets but exhibits significant points of practical hesitation and unresolved conflict with traditional methods, particularly concerning grammar and classroom management. Teachers demonstrated their strongest and most unified support for the principles of interactive, learner-centered classrooms. The highest level of agreement was for Item 9 ("Group work allows students to explore problems"), with 93.3% of teachers (43.3% strongly agreeing + 50.0% agreeing) affirming this notion, reflected in the high mean score of 4.32. This was closely followed by Item 8 ("The learner-centered approach encourages responsibility"), which was supported by 92.5% of

respondents (45.0% + 47.5%). The essential nature of collaboration itself was confirmed in Item 2 ("Group work activities are essential"), with 88.3% agreement (35.0% + 53.3%). This commitment to student agency was further evidenced by strong agreement that Item 4 ("Learners can suggest the content and activities") is viable (85.9% agreement; 29.2% + 56.7%) and that Item 5 ("Training learners to take responsibility for their own learning") is important (82.5% agreement; 35.0% + 47.5%).

A significant majority of teachers also aligned with the CLT view, which diminishes the centrality of explicit grammar instruction. Item 3 ("Grammar is a means not an end") was supported by 85.8% of teachers (23.3% + 62.5%), and a nearly identical majority of 82.5% agreed with Item 23 ("Direct grammar instruction is NOT essential") (30.0% + 52.5%). The belief that Item 12 ("Knowledge of the rules of a language is not sufficient") was held by 83.4% (19.2% + 64.2%), and a similar 82.5% agreed that Item 17 ("Mastering the rules of grammar is not enough") (14.2% + 68.3%). This theoretical shift extends to the teacher's role, with 82.5% agreeing that Item 7 ("The teacher is no longer an 'authority' and 'instructor'") (23.3% + 59.2%) and an overwhelming 90.9% affirming that Item 24 ("The teacher must supplement the textbook") (34.2% + 56.7%) is necessary.

However, this theoretical consensus is sharply tempered by pragmatic concerns and mixed attitudes on implementation. A telling paradox is found in Item 11, where 86.7% of teachers (35.0% + 51.7%) agreed that catering to all needs is impossible in a large class, directly contradicting learner-centered ideals. While they value group work, their belief in its practicality wavers, with only 78.4% agreeing that Item 13 ("Group work activities are practical") (29.2% + 49.2%) and a much lower 53.4% agreeing that Item 21 ("Small group work can replace whole class instruction") (9.2% + 44.2%), with 17.5% actively disagreeing. The most significant conflict emerges around accuracy and error correction. Teachers are deeply divided on Item 1 ("Grammatical correctness is a criterion for judging performance"), with 52.5% in agreement (25.8% + 26.7%) but 37.5% in disagreement (29.2% + 8.3%). While 81.6% agree that Item 10 ("Errors are a natural part of learning") (23.3% + 58.3%), their commitment to this principle is uncertain, as only 71.7% agree that Item 14 ("Much correction is wasteful of time") (19.2% + 52.5%), with a substantial 18.3% remaining neutral. Weaker endorsement is also seen for foundational CLT concepts like Item 18 ("Language as a vehicle for doing something is more effective"), which garnered only 65.0% agreement (15.0% + 50.0%), and Item 20 ("Tasks should be based on students' needs"), which saw 68.4% agreement (24.2% + 44.2%) but also a notable 15.8% in disagreement. Finally, teachers showed moderate belief in CLT outcomes, with 81.6% agreeing that Item 15 ("CLT learners are fluent and accurate") (23.3% + 58.3%) and 75.0% agreeing that Item 6 ("Feedback must be focused on appropriateness") (20.8% + 54.2%), though 21.7% were neutral on the latter, indicating lingering uncertainty about moving completely away from error-focused feedback.

To answer the second research question, exploring the factors that influence the gap between the communicative approach and the reality of education in Iran, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Based on the analysis of the provided interview transcripts, the factors influencing the gap between the CLT and the reality of education in Iran can be organized into four central themes: Contextual and Infrastructural Constraints, Curriculum and Assessment Pressures, Learner-Related Challenges, and Insufficient Teacher Preparation and Support. Table 3 provides the results of the reliability estimates of the interview questions.

**Table 3***Symmetric Measures*

		Value	Asymptotic Standard Error <sup>a</sup>	Approximate T <sup>b</sup>	Approximate Significance
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.870	.080	9.019	.000
N of Valid Cases		20			

To ensure scoring consistency in analyzing the interview, inter-rater reliability was calculated. The resulting Kappa coefficient of .87 confirms a strong consensus in the analysis provided by the two raters. The themes obtained from the transcription of the responses were as follows:

**Theme 1: Contextual and Infrastructural Constraints**

Most teachers said that the classroom's space and environment are the main obstacles they face. They believed that having too many students in a class and not enough teaching time made it very hard to use fun and engaging activities. Teachers thought it was really hard to handle communication tasks in crowded classrooms. One teacher clearly said, "It's hard to use talkative activities when the class is too big because it's tough to handle all the students and let everyone talk." Another teacher mentioned, "Big classes" are a big challenge. Also, they often talked about not having enough time. A teacher said, "Honestly, not very often, because there's not enough time." Another teacher mentioned that "limited time and exam stress" make it hard to apply what they learn.

Everyone agreed that there is a big shortage of teaching tools and technology. One teacher said, "Even though I have learned about the teaching method. I don't have all the supplies that are needed." They said they need things like 'smart boards, records,' and especially a 'Sound Laboratory' to help students listen to English and practice speaking it.

**Theme 2: Curriculum and Assessment Pressures**

Professors said that the big education system, especially the focus on exams and rigid lesson plans, goes against the ideas of the CLT. They believed it was important to get students ready for tests and to follow a set curriculum, which often made professors and instructors focus more on grammar and accuracy instead of fluency and communication skills. The stress from exams was very strong. For example, one teacher mentioned that a big problem is "exam pressure." Another teacher said that part of the support from the authorities should be "not having exams to measure student success." Also, teachers felt restricted by the curriculum and textbooks they had to follow. One of them said, "Tests, books, and school rules affect my teaching a lot because I have to stick to the curriculum and get students ready for exams." This shows the conflict between following rules and teaching in a way that encourages communication.

**Theme 3: Learner-Related Challenges**

The data showed that students' attitudes and skills are a big challenge. Teachers believe that students sometimes don't take part in speaking activities because they feel anxious and lack confidence. One common thing noticed was that students often don't want to talk. Teachers observed that students are "afraid to speak in English because they lack confidence," and many mentioned that students feel "shy or scared of making mistakes." One teacher said, "Hesitation is the biggest issue, to be honest". In some cases, it was also noted that students were not very involved. One teacher said,

"The only thing stopping them is that they don't want to learn," meaning that getting students excited can be more important than the best teaching methods.

#### **Theme 4: Insufficient Teacher Preparation and Support**

Some teachers had training, but they felt it was mostly theoretical and didn't include enough practical help or ongoing resources to assist them in using the approach. They believed that a better support system and a more practical way to grow professionally were necessary to help carry out the CLT. A teacher pointed out that there is a gap between what they learn in training and what happens in real life. The teacher said:

*They discuss ideas that help us use this method, but in reality, we don't have all the materials we need. Teachers said they need ongoing support, not just single workshops. They suggested "training for teachers" and "the right teaching tools and classroom setup."*

One teacher pointed out the importance of "ways to teach," showing they want more help with teaching methods.

In summary, the teachers said that the difference between the communicative approach and what happens in the classroom doesn't come from ignoring its ideas. Instead, it's due to a mix of issues like big class sizes, tight schedules, pressure from exams, classrooms that lack resources, and anxiety felt by both teachers and students, all of which create challenges.

### **6 Discussions**

The results of this study showed that Iranian EFL teachers had different opinions about the CLT method. They really believed in the idea, but had some worries about how to use it in real life. From practical experience, teachers agreed with the key ideas of CLT, which emphasizes interaction and making students the focus of their learning. However, they still faced problems when trying to use these ideas fully in actual classroom settings.

Teachers expressed strong support for group work and learner responsibility as central components of CLT (Item 9, average score = 4). 32) and how responsible students are (Item 8, average score = 4). 23) were really important. This showed they thought that teamwork and talking with each other helped students learn languages more effectively. This supported the findings of Ashoori Tootkaboni and Khatib (2017), who discovered that Iranian teachers generally have a positive opinion about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It also agreed with Alghamdi's (2021) study that group activities are important but should be adjusted to suit local conditions. Similarly, Ahmadi and Farahian (2024) discovered that there are difficulties related to culture and institutions. This agrees with what Iranian teachers think. They mostly agreed with the idea of CLT, but they realized that there were real issues that made it difficult to put into practice.

Many of the participants agreed that they should pay less attention to grammar (in items 3 and 23). This means they were shifting from making grammar the main goal to using it just as a tool to help us communicate. This finding is consistent with Jafari and Rahimi (2024), who also reported a gap between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. But the different views on getting things right and correcting errors showed that there was still an issue. Most teachers knew that making mistakes is a usual part of learning, but they had different views on how important grammar is. This showed that there were ongoing arguments between old-school ideas that focus on correct grammar and newer

teaching methods that prioritize speaking smoothly. This mixed feeling relates to Zendah's (2025) research in Palestine. In that study, focusing on tests and a culture that didn't let students take control kept teachers in their usual positions and highlighted grammar.

Surprisingly, even though teachers enjoyed group work a lot, only 53.4% felt that it could completely replace teaching the whole class, while over 17% did not agree. This cautious attitude may stem from the practical challenges of managing large classes and the lack of sufficient resources. In interviews, teachers mentioned that classes are often overcrowded and that teaching materials are insufficient. These findings align with previous reports that highlight the systemic issues in educational settings (Khojasteh et al., 2023). For instance, Nugroho and Atmojo (2023) noted that even teachers who are enthusiastic about student-centered approaches often struggle to implement CLT due to structural constraints.

The interview responses also revealed that external factors, such as exam pressure and a rigid curriculum, hinder the adoption of more flexible teaching methods. This supports the findings of Sharifi Feriz et al. (2025), who emphasized the mismatch between students' learning needs and the traditional teacher-centered approaches still prevalent in many classrooms. Teachers acknowledged the need for more resources and the complexity of adapting to new pedagogical demands brought by CLT. Learners, too, expressed a need for more effective and ongoing teacher training, a point echoed in the study by Rahman et al. (2025), which found that insufficient training significantly hampers the successful implementation of CLT.

According to Rahman et al. (2025), teachers who lacked proper training faced greater challenges in applying CLT strategies effectively. This highlights a critical gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in real classroom settings. It also underscores the importance of continuous, context-specific professional development rather than one-time training sessions. These findings contribute to the broader discussion on language pedagogy by emphasizing the interplay between institutional support, teacher agency, and classroom realities.

Research shows that teacher enthusiasm alone is not sufficient for CLT to be fully implemented. Institutional reforms and curriculum flexibility are also essential. In Iranian English classrooms, there is a growing recognition of CLT principles, yet teachers are constrained by real-world limitations. Therefore, they must adapt their methods to suit the practical conditions of their teaching environments. In short, the results of this study align with previous research conducted in Iran and other contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. They demonstrate that while CLT is widely supported in theory, its full implementation is hindered by systemic issues such as large class sizes, limited resources, exam-oriented teaching, and inadequate teacher preparation. The teachers' perspectives highlight how contextual factors—such as cultural norms and institutional policies—shape classroom communication and pedagogical choices. This suggests that meaningful change requires not only teacher training but also structural improvements in schools and sustained support for educators.

## 7 Conclusion and Implications

This study examined Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of CLT and the factors contributing to the gap between its principles and classroom practice. The results showed clear support for the key ideas of CLT. This includes focusing on the student, working in groups, and not relying on traditional grammar lessons. This conclusion is supported by the strong internal consistency of the questionnaire

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responses and the convergence of the interview data. Teachers often prefer a way of teaching that helps students talk and work together. This shows a positive shift in how people think about education.

However, using CLT can be hard because of the circumstances, the schools, and the students. Large class sizes, short teaching time, and a lack of teaching tools and technology make it hard to group work and give individual attention to students. These problems with facilities are similar to what earlier studies on English as a Foreign Language in Iran have found (Ahmadi & Farahian, 2024; Khojasteh et al.2023). Also, strict rules in the curriculum, pressure from exams, and current grading systems make teachers focus mostly on correct grammar. This makes it difficult for them to use teaching methods that encourage communication. Issues with students, such as low self-esteem, reluctance to speak, and lack of motivation, make it difficult to apply the student-centered methods of CLT.

These results help us see how CLT operates in everyday life. It explains how what teachers believe, what students are like, and how the school system work together and influence one another. Just being acknowledged isn't enough to make real changes in teaching. If we don't address the larger problems and cultures involved, simply supporting an idea won't bring about change. The results show that we need to give teachers training that matches their needs, make classroom resources better, and let schools change what they teach. This will help teachers and students improve their communication skills.

The study had some limitations. It depended on what teachers said about themselves, but that might not reflect how they actually behave in the classroom. There were only a few participants in the study, so the results may not be useful for other situations. The study only examined two universities in Tabriz and one in Tehran in Iran, so the results may not be the same for universities in other countries, cities, or less formal institutions. Future research could involve observing classrooms to check the findings, include a wider range of participants, and examine how specific support, like training or resources, can help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

In short, this study found that Iranian English teachers are optimistic about CLT, but they encounter several challenges that make it difficult to use it completely. We need to address these issues in various ways, such as through rules, schools, teaching styles, and emotional support, to make language education better. This way, we can make sure it matches both our ideas and what really happens in classrooms.

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All authors have conducted the study, collected data, analyzed and interpreted the data, and written up the manuscript.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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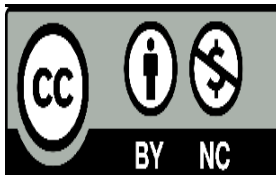
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## Appendix

### Interview questions

1. How do class size, limited time, and lack of resources (e.g., smart boards, sound labs) hinder your implementation of interactive CLT activities?
2. To what extent do exam-oriented policies, textbooks, and syllabi force you to prioritize grammar over fluency in CLT practices?
3. What student factors like shyness, low confidence, or motivation affect participation in communicative tasks?
4. How effective is your CLT training in practice, and what ongoing support or materials do you need for successful implementation?
5. What are the most significant factors creating the discrepancy between CLT ideals and your classroom reality?
6. What changes in policy, resources, or professional development would help bridge the CLT-practice gap in Iran?



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