

Communicative Language Teaching in Rural Schools in China: Teachers' Perspectives

YIHAN FANG (Corresponding author)
School of Languages, Literacies and Translation
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia
fangyihan@student.usm.my

ALLA KHAN [0000-0003-4435-4583]
School of Languages, Literacies and Translation
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia
allabaksh@usm.my

MALINI GANAPATHY [0000-0002-1495-6340]
School of Languages, Literacies and Translation
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia
malinik@usm.my

ABSTRACT

The approach to teaching second and foreign languages that emphasises interaction as both the means and the ultimate aim in the process of learning a language is known as communicative language teaching. By introducing communicative methodologies into their national curricula, many nations, notably China, have started teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Since 2001, the CLT technique has been encouraged at the elementary school level, and young learners' communication skills are prioritised at the primary level. However, CLT is mostly employed at secondary and tertiary levels of education in almost every education system globally. It is rarely associated with primary school teachers, whose experiences might be different from those at higher levels. To address this gap, the present study was conducted. To this end, a survey was administered to thirty primary school teachers to learn more about their perspectives and the challenges they faced when attempting CLT in China, specifically rural China. Rural settings and rural teachers' perspectives and impressions may differ from those of urban settings. The quantitative result of the study indicated teachers' misunderstandings of CLT. Many of them claimed that CLT is a teacher-centred approach when it is a student-centred one. In addition, several obstacles were also found to inhibit the implementation of CLT, which include the teachers themselves, the students, the educational system of China, and CLT itself. Policymakers and teachers in China are mainly expected to benefit from the findings of this study. Other education systems beyond China are expected to benefit from the findings too.

Keywords: China; communicative competence; communicative language teaching; primary schools; rural schools

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INTRODUCTION

Communicative language teaching (hereinafter CLT), being an approach to teaching foreign languages, is also known as the communicative approach. As its name implies, CLT promotes interaction as both the means and the ultimate aim in the process of learning a language. The fundamental principle behind CLT is communication, where learners are expected to use English in real-life situations. Richards and Rodgers (2014) assert that CLT emphasises the intrinsic value of communicative competence through meaningful communication and the use of language in classrooms for second language teaching.

Globalisation impacts language teaching and education policies greatly around the world. English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught in several countries (including China) by incorporating communicative approaches into their national curricula (Chen, 2020; Nunan, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Liao (2004) notes that the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) in China authorised and issued three reformed English syllabuses in 1992, 1993, and 1996 respectively to emphasise studying linguistic competence for communication among secondary schools. The Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) released a redesigned syllabus in 1999 that highlighted the communicative capacity of college EFL students (Li & Zhao, 2021) by favouring CLT as the primary instructional medium in colleges. Teachers should make efforts to assist students in participating actively in English activities and expressing their ideas freely, according to a report issued by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce in 2011 (MOE, 2011). In 2018, the MOE issued a China English proficiency scale that includes communicative skills as one of the key assessments (Li, 2021). The ambition was advanced in 2001 from the third grade onward (Hu, 2005). The development of oral communicative English abilities was to be emphasised by instructors in accordance with the new curricula adopted by the government. As a result, the CLT approach has been promoted at the elementary school level, and the communication skills of young learners are emphasised at primary level. From the first grade on, educational movements emphasising "using English in real context" have been developed to help pupils become functional users of English rather than just knowledge consumers (MOE, 2022).

Although CLT was originally implemented in China in 1979, the majority of EFL classrooms in China used traditional teaching strategies, including grammar translation and audio-lingual methods (Paul & Liu, 2018). Despite the popularity of CLT in China, communicative competence is deficient, and upon reviewing the literature, the adoption of CLT in the Chinese context has been fraught with difficulties and challenges (Chen, 2020; Hu, 2002; Huang, 2016; Li, 2021; Liao, 2004). A few cases of CLT have been unsuccessfully implemented in other Asia-Pacific areas at the school level, including secondary and tertiary EFL classrooms (Nunan, 2003; Humphrise & Burns, 2015). Overall culture differences and teachers' perceptions are the two most referred factors. Liao (2004) also stressed that teachers can overcome any difficulties they experience (for example, large classes or examination based on grammar) if they perceive them.

In the long run, many related studies on CLT have thus far focused on CLT practices among teachers at the secondary level (Chen, 2020; Liao, 2004) and tertiary level (Lin & Zhao, 2021; Humphrise & Burns, 2015), but there are only a few studies that have investigated such practices at the primary level, especially in the rural areas of China. Rural settings and rural teachers' perspectives and impressions are also important to discuss because they may differ

from those of urban settings (Huang, 2016). In the literature, challenges with applying CLT techniques among instructors at the secondary (Armnazi & Alakrash, 2021; Chen, 2020) and postsecondary (Al Asmari, 2015; Abahussain, 2016) levels have been mentioned. These challenges include culture, teachers, the educational system, and others.

Several studies have focused on the primary level and only discussed the English proficiency of teachers and communicative activities in other Asian countries (Butler, 2004; Butler, 2005). Huang (2016) revealed challenges teachers faced in rural Taiwan including the low cognitive resources of students with limited L1 proficiency, the indifferent attitudes of rural parents and the varying language competence among pupils in one class.

However, many recent studies have exposed the positive influence of CLT practices on language teaching at the primary level in other contexts, such as Malaysia and Ecuador (Eddie & Aziz, 2020; Toro et al., 2018). Since elementary school environments have been reported to be considerably different from those at higher levels (Huang, 2016), it is unclear if primary school teachers in China experience the same challenges as secondary school teachers or if rural China has entirely separate problems. The discussion of CLT's practical constraints in various EFL situations not only highlights its importance but also draws more attention to the controversies that have emerged and its cultural appropriateness (Tanaka, 2009).

To close this gap, the current study examines how primary school teachers perceive CLT and the difficulties they face in rural China due to physical and economical constraints.

The research questions of the present study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching Approach among rural primary school teachers in China?
2. How do challenges hinder the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching among rural primary school teachers in China?

RELATED LITERATURE

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

(CLT) was first introduced in the 1970s. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), CLT was disseminated around the world as a fully prepared collection of concepts and processes. CLT is widely regarded as one of the most influential theoretical models and approaches for second language teaching and learning. The communicative approach to language teaching and learning refers to principles that can be applied to support a wide range of classroom activities that reflect a communicative perspective during teaching practice (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) described the characteristics of CLT as incorporating authentic language and communicative activities; CLT evaluates both students' accuracy and fluency, which addresses all four skills to facilitate communication. Teachers play both the roles of facilitators and advisors, and errors are to be expected.

In general, the focus of CLT involves the roles of teachers and learners, classroom activities, the pedagogical system, and materials. Teachers' perceptions and authentic context will be further discussed later.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

(CLT) is one of the approaches to second language teaching, as stated previously. As noted by Richards and Rodgers (2014), it should be based on promoting what Hymes (1972) called communicative competence (hereinafter CC), which will engage and facilitate learners in communication during the foreign language learning process.

Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence as the capacity to interact socially and effectively while conforming to the sociolinguistic standards of appropriateness, feasibility, and possibility. Canale and Swain (1983) developed the communicative competence hypothesis by combining perspectives from many fields. They describe communicative competence as the knowledge and skills required for effective communication, comprising four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Their theory has become an established theoretical framework for second language teaching and later became the fundamental principle of CLT. Anchored on Canale and Swain's (1983) Communicative Competence Theory, the construct of the instrument was designed to collect data in the study.

RESISTANCE IN CHINA

In recent years, experts from both China and Western nations have debated whether CLT should be adopted in China and whether it would be appropriate or effective (Hu, 2002; Li, 2021; Lu & Moore, 2018; Rao, 1996). This discussion identified a wide range of barriers to adopting CLT in the Chinese context. Overall cultural differences and the teacher factor are the most frequently mentioned.

CULTURE-RELATED CHALLENGES

Cultural differences were the most commonly referred-to factor. Hu (2002) noted that CLT tenets embody opposite teaching ideologies in contrast with Chinese culture. In China, the educational system is founded on ancient epistemology, which is characterised by teacher dominance, receptivity, and conformity, whereas CLT emphasises interactivity, learner-centeredness, verbal activeness, independence, and individuality.

National exams can significantly impact teachers' practice in various situations when teachers are required to prepare students for standardised tests, and China is one of them. When parents want high exam scores, most teachers ignore the communicative activities offered in the textbooks. Often, excessive curriculum content and limited time make it difficult for teachers to conduct communicative activities in the classroom and for preparation. In many cases, teachers are under tight deadlines when it comes to finishing syllabi (Chen, 2020; Nunan, 2003; Li, 2021).

Lu and Moore (2018) examined 60 Chinese EFL teachers with western training backgrounds regarding CLT in tertiary education. They explain that context is crucial in implementing CLT, including time constraints, large classes, and examination-based education systems. Both learner autonomy and CC principles brought challenges as well. They suggested implementing CLT within a specific context so that a Chinese style could emerge.

These studies indicate that teachers focus mainly on reading and writing skills when helping students pass these entrance exams. As much as the government is emphasising the importance of developing practical communication skills, this is seldom reflected in the classroom, where

teachers are concerned about entrance exams, so they spend most of their time teaching for the tests rather than engaging in communication activities (Ur, 2013).

TEACHER-RELATED CHALLENGES

Another encumbrance to adopting CLT is that teachers struggle with understanding CLT, implying teachers' misunderstanding (Dori, 2017; Lin & Zhao, 2021). Personal beliefs, experiences, and cultural differences in perceiving the concept of communicative competence influenced the teachers' conceptualization of CLT. They deviated from CLT practices and adhered to traditional language teaching methods (Dori, 2017).

Lin and Zhao (2021) report that teachers' misconceptions of the basic principles of CLT have hindered CLT implementation in a higher education institute. Most teachers in their study believe that CLT emphasises the teaching of listening and speaking skills over reading and writing and lacks any grammar instruction. Although teachers with western training backgrounds were well acquainted with CLT principles, the concept of a teacher as a facilitator remained controversial, as they still regarded themselves as authority figures (Lu & Moore, 2018).

Studies reflected teachers' lack of knowledge about tested communicative competence components such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and discourse (Canale & Swain, 1983). Nazari (2007) studied Iranian EFL teachers' understanding of CC. He distinguished between sociocultural tenets and linguistic competence, indicating that teachers remain unaware of the distinction. This, for instance, led to teachers' inclination towards linguistic competence, thus adhering to a traditional method like the grammar-translation approach.

Humphrise and Burns (2015) studied teachers' attitudes and classroom practices in a Japanese college and reported that the main barriers to CLT-oriented textbooks were teachers' beliefs, understanding of the new approach, and lack of ongoing support. In another recent study, Chen (2020) examined classroom practice in a secondary school in Taiwan to demonstrate that teachers limited understanding of the new was a defining factor. Before teachers attempted to employ new pedagogies, they needed to first comprehend them.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative approach in which a questionnaire was administered to a group of rural primary school teachers. It also contributed to a thorough and rich understanding of the participants' opinions and experiences regarding their social and cultural contexts. It was designed to assess teachers' perceptions of CLT and obstacles preventing its use in elementary schools in rural China's EFL education.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

This study employed an adopted survey instrument (Abahussain, 2016; Armnazi & Alakrash, 2021) to gather teachers' perceptions about CLT and the challenges they faced. The questionnaire's first section asked about the respondent's age, educational background, teaching experience, particularly in English, and class size. The second part of the survey instrument examined teachers' perceptions of CLT through a four-point ordinal scale with endpoints of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. In the third section, challenges were

divided into four categories: teacher-related, Student-related, Educational-related, and CLT-related. Respondents chose the level of challenge using a four-point ordinal scale with endpoints of major challenge, challenge, mild challenge, and not a challenge.

THE SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The study was carried out in the rural County of Hongya in the southwest Chinese province of Sichuan. It is renowned for its hilly topography and mountainous landscape. In Hongya, there were about 350,000 residents spread across 12 towns. There are 36 schools in this county (27 elementary, 13 juniors high, and 1 senior high school), most of which are located in outlying mountain areas. Out of 1935 total students, there are 902 teachers in primary schools, including all subjects, but it didn't mention the number of English teachers. In addition, just 55 of the classes in the three largest schools had brand-new, high-tech amenities (Compilation Centre of Party History and Local Chronicles in Hongya County, 2021). A voluntary online poll of thirty English teachers from the 27 elementary schools was conducted.

TEACHERS

The study employed frequency and percentage to describe the distribution of the participants (n = 30), as shown in Table 1, in terms of gender, age group, education level, educational course taken, teaching experience (years), exposure to an English-speaking country, participants' school location, and finally their teaching class size.

The male-to-female ratio is 1:5 in the gender distribution of the study. Women teachers make up the bulk of participants (83.3%), as do adults between the ages of 26 and 45 (93.3%). Because 93.3 percent of them had more than six years of teaching experience, most of them are regarded as senior teachers. Teachers tend to have an associate degree (40%), or a degree in the arts (50%), but only a small percentage of participants have studied or worked in an English-speaking nation (16.7%). According to the results, most of the respondents work in the county's central business district. Lastly, 90% of responders manage large classes (class sizes 40 and above).

Table 1

Demography profiles of respondents

Demography	N	%
Gender		
Male	5	16.70%
Female	25	83.30%
Age		
26-35 years old	16	53.30%
36-45 years old	12	40.00%
Above 45 years old	2	6.70%
Education Level		
Degree of Arts	15	50.00%
Master of Arts	3	10.00%
Associate Degree	12	40.00%
Course		

Demography	N	%
English	22	73.30%
Education	6	20.00%
Others	2	6.70%
Teaching Experience		
Less than 6 years	2	6.70%
6-10 years	9	30.00%
11-15 years	9	30.00%
More than 15 years	10	33.30%
Studied/worked in an English-speaking country		
Yes	5	16.70%
No	25	83.30%
School location		
Downtown	18	60.00%
Township	11	36.70%
Others	1	3.30%
Class size		
Less than 40	3	10.00%
40-50	7	23.30%
More than 50	20	66.70%

DATA ANALYSIS

To ascertain the means and overall number of responses from the participants, the survey data was analysed using SPSS 27 with inferential statistics. The reliability or internal consistency of the questionnaire in each relevant part was evaluated with Cronbach's Alpha. All constructs were found to have satisfactory reliability, with reliability values ranging from 0.741 to 0.909. According to Nunnally (1978), the rule of thumb for reliability is when Cronbach's alpha is greater than 0.7.

Therefore, the study first analyses the demographic information in Table 1. Then mean scores were used with a bar chart to show the agreement level of each question in the CLT knowledge section. One sample t test with a test mean value of 2.5 (the midpoint of a 1–4 scale) was employed to test whether the level of agreement was significantly higher or lower than 2.5. If the mean value was significantly greater than 2.5, then respondents showed higher agreement. If the mean value was significantly lower than 2.5, then respondents showed lower agreement. However, if the mean value wasn't significantly different from the midpoint (2.5), respondents' agreement level was neutral. Similar approaches were employed to measure different types of challenges in adopting CLT. A mean value significantly higher than 2.5 indicated a real challenge, while a mean value significantly lower than 2.5 indicated no challenge.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were nine elements in the survey to learn how teachers felt about the fundamental ideas of CLT including descriptive aspects and widespread misconceptions about CLT that had been documented in the literature. It's vital to remember that questions 11, 13, 16, and 19 were reversed, hence their scores were flipped for analysis. According to the reversed question, respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement lacked knowledge of CLT. According to Figure 1, most respondents in Q11 (mean=2.1), Q13 (mean=1.5), and Q19 (mean=2.1) had less knowledge of CLT.

PERCEPTIONS OF CLT

Figure 1 indicates how well-versed in CLT the teachers were in rural China. CLT is a technique that focuses on the student (mean = 3.5) and requires a high level of English proficiency from teachers (mean = 3.6). Various academics have also drawn attention to this educational orientation, which distinguishes CLT as a learner-centred strategy (Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), this learner centrality characteristic sets CLT apart from other teaching strategies.

Additionally, they emphasised the significance of teaching language students how to use the language for communicative objectives, such as through communication activities (mean = 3.7), the application of strategic competence (mean = 2.9), and the use of authentic resources (mean = 3.4). It is notable that the participants showed clear misconceptions about CLT. In their opinion, CLT prioritises listening and speaking abilities over other skills for Q13 (mean = 1.5).

For the majority, the concept of CLT is concerned with how teachers and students communicate with each other and how they converse (speaking skills). They believe communicative classes require highly proficient English teachers, and CLT focuses primarily on oral skills; therefore, their limited proficiency in English prevents them from using CLT effectively.

One of the basic principles of CLT is that students should learn four basic skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) at the same time. When practising in real life, the four skills occur simultaneously. It is best to integrate them into the teaching process (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). These results reflect those of Lu and Moore (2018), who also found that integrating several language skills was difficult in their class at the university because language skills were taught separately and there was limited time for teaching schedules.

The second misconception was that only pair and group work is appropriate for the usage of CLT for Q16 (mean = 2.6). Richards and Rodgers (2014) point out that CLT can provide learners with a dynamic, cooperative environment for practising. Unlike other learning methods, CLT features learner engagement by providing them with a variety of classroom activities that expose them to the language in a meaningful, authentic context. CLT permits a wide range of activities, as long as they enable learners to achieve communicative goals and engage them in communication.

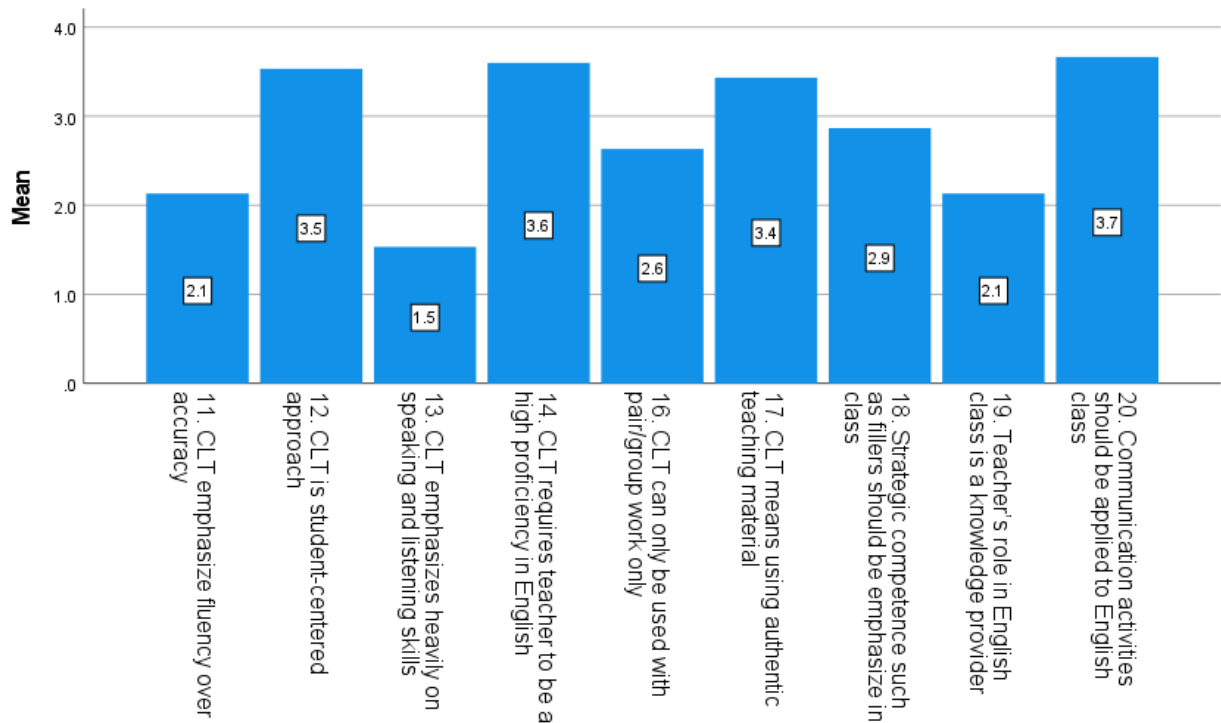
In CLT classrooms, teachers must play two roles: facilitator and monitor. Therefore, they should actively engage in meaningful negotiations with students. To facilitate language learning, teachers must develop a new understanding of how learners make mistakes and their own roles that are incompatible with traditional ones. Besides these, teachers also serve as counsellors, analysts, and group process managers (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). But the result in Figure 1

presents teachers' roles in rural areas as knowledge givers for Q19 (mean = 2.1), which is the teacher-centred grammar-translation teaching class. Although teachers with western training backgrounds were well acquainted with CLT principles, the concept of teachers as facilitators remained controversial, as they still regarded themselves as authority figures (Lu & Moore, 2018).

According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), language use should be fluent, accurate, and appropriate as part of a second language learning strategy. A balance between fluency activities and accuracy activities was recommended. Accuracy activities should enhance fluency activities. A common misconception among teachers is that CLT only targets fluency and ignores accuracy without focusing on the form. However, participants emphasise fluency over accuracy for Q11 (mean = 2.1), which ignores grammar and vocabulary. As a matter of fact, CLT provides learners with opportunities to develop both fluency and accuracy through the development of CC.

Figure 1

Mean scores of CLT knowledge



CHALLENGES IN RURAL CHINA

This section includes four sections: challenges for teachers, challenges for students, challenges for the educational system, and challenges for CLT. The questionnaire was intended to examine the challenges teachers face in elementary schools of Hongya county when implementing CLT.

TEACHER RELATED CHALLENGES

Figure 2 represents the difficulties teachers experienced when using CLT. All the bars were greater than 2.5 (mid-point), suggesting all the challenges related to teachers are significant to participants.

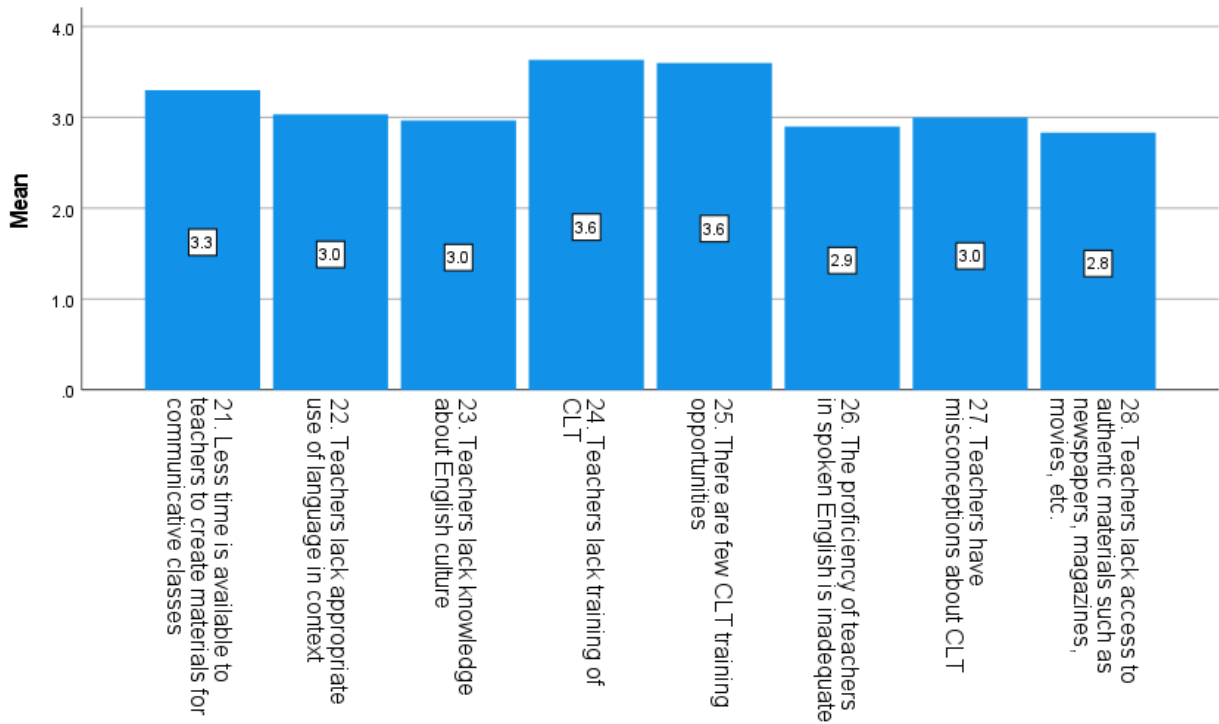
Among them, “teachers lack training in CLT (mean = 3.6)”, and “there are few CLT training opportunities (mean = 3.6)” are faced by most of the participants. The result revealed that in rural areas, there is less training available, and few, if any, would have the opportunity to attend. According to Lu and Moore (2018), CLT principles are well understood and more favourable to Chinese EFL teachers with western-trained pedagogical backgrounds. Their Western training provides them with opportunities to learn, self-learn, attend workshops, and observe CLT classrooms. When they come back to China, they focus more on students' CC and authentic language use. Teachers' skills and abilities require ongoing training, especially with advances in technology and global communication. When Western-trained teachers collaborate with locally well-trained teachers, the outcome is the establishment of the effectiveness and localization of CLT. Furthermore, it is also recommended that CLT training focus on curriculum design for integrating multicultural approaches, simulations, and scenarios and providing teachers with opportunities to put theory into practise (Lu & Moore, 2018).

CLT adoption may be hampered by uncommunicative materials; however, the absence of authentic sources represents a major challenge (mean = 2.8). To bridge this gap, teachers need to create their own CLT materials, which are considered time-consuming and an extra burden on teachers. And the time required to develop materials for CLT activities is limited (mean = 3.3), which might be caused by teachers being pressurised by their existing workload. Moreover, an English class is restricted to 45 minutes, which is not enough time to cover a variety of communicative activities.

Teachers' English proficiency (mean=2.9) hindered the implementation of CLT and communicative activities in classrooms. The result illustrates an essential fact about the challenges of using CLT, namely the learners' lack of confidence in their proficiency in English and difficulties managing communicative activities. The findings are in accordance with those of other studies (Butler, 2004; Lin & Zhao, 2021).

Figure 2

Mean scores of challenges related to teachers



STUDENT RELATED CHALLENGES

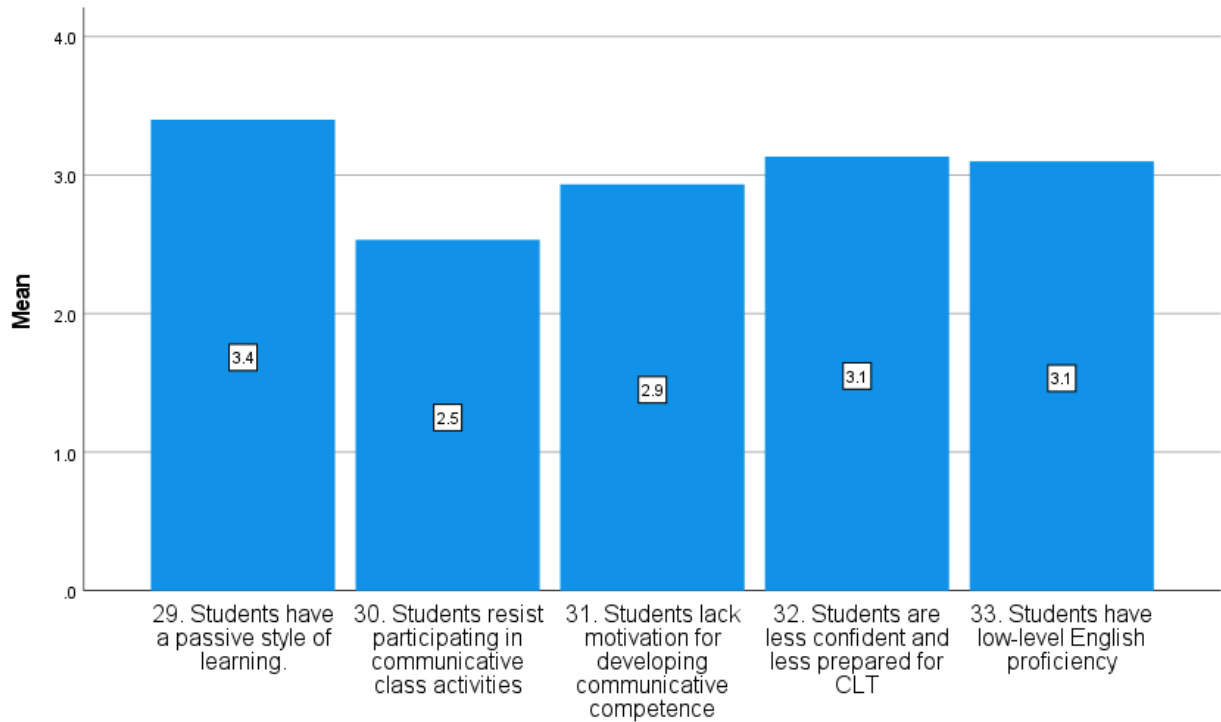
Figure 3 shows the mean scores of student-related challenges in teachers' opinions. The challenges related to students that are mentioned in the questionnaire were passive learning styles, resistance to CLT activities, a lack of motivation, less confidence, and a low English proficiency level.

All the challenges showed mean scores greater than 2.5 (midpoint) except for Q30, indicating that students have a positive attitude towards engaging in communicative activities. As opposed to students at tertiary levels, attending lectures, taking notes, and doing exercises quietly was more appealing to them than participating in communicative activities. Lu and Moore (2018) found that college students were less favourable to CLT, even though teachers were becoming more willing to incorporate it.

Clearly, the challenge faced by most participants is that “students have a passive style of learning,” with mean scores of 3.4. Teacher-centred education is the norm, and classes usually have more than 50 students (66.7%), which contributes to passive learning among students. In addition, low proficiency levels (mean = 3.1) among students led to low self-esteem and underprepared students. In this regard, it might be one of the main reasons why teachers use CLT methods in their classrooms but still stick to the traditional teacher-centred approach.

Figure 3

Mean scores of challenges related to students



EDUCATION SYSTEM RELATED CHALLENGES

For education system-related challenges faced by primary English teachers, Figure 4 showed that except for the equipment of AV aids (short for Audio-Visual aids), all other mean scores are greater than 2.5 (mid-point). Most of the participants are facing difficulties in terms of “lack of enough support from administration (mean = 3.4)” and “Lack of authentic materials (mean = 3.3).

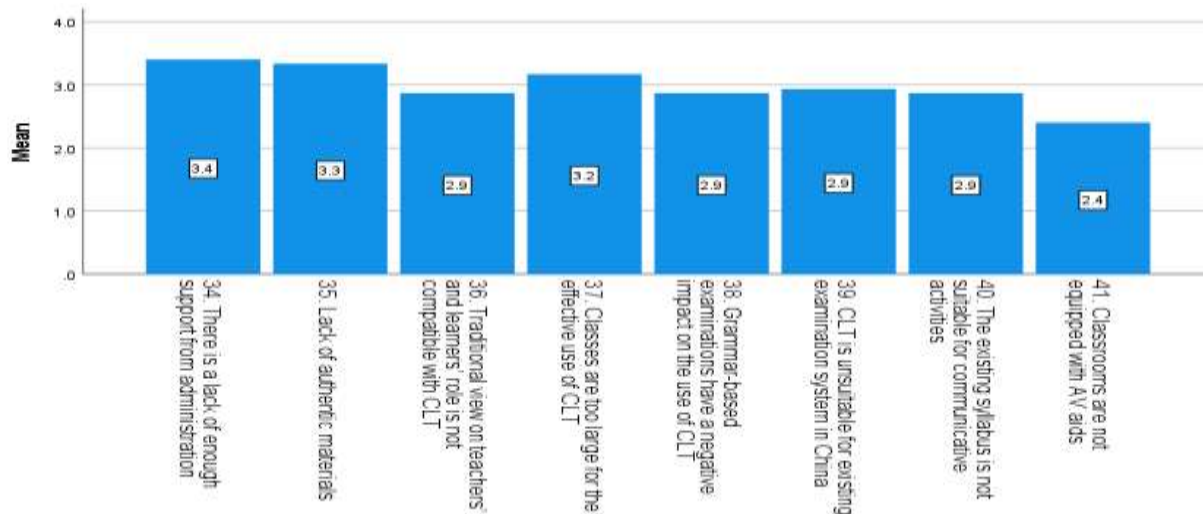
The examination system and grammar-based assessment are considered unsuitable for CLT (mean = 2.9), which influences the teaching practises and the focus of teaching to help students attain high exam results and ignores the development of communicative competence.

Another critical problem mentioned by teachers as an obstacle was that classes are too large for the effective use of CLT (mean = 3.2). Using CLT, teachers are expected to observe each student’s reaction during the activities and ensure that feedback is given accordingly. Teachers may find it difficult to notice everyone, especially students who sit at the back of the classroom, when 90% of the classrooms in the study are large. Lin and Zhao (2021) also reported that overcrowded classrooms are seen as the major obstacle for teachers to incorporate CLT practises in their classrooms. In the presence of chaos, it is extremely difficult to organise classroom activities while there is uncontrollable behaviour and students cannot engage in authentic communication. There are many communicative activities that can’t be carried out effectively in the classroom because of this situation. According to Li (2021), in a class with too many students, their levels of communication skills vary, making it impossible to meet their communicative

needs. It is likely that such restrictions will never be resolved unless the educational system's leaders take constructive steps to alleviate them.

Figure 4

Mean scores of challenges related to education system



CLT RELATED CHALLENGES.

Figure 5 portrayed the challenges related to CLT. All the mean scores were greater than 2.5 (the midpoint), indicating the severe obstacles and problems primary English teachers encountered when adopting CLT in rural China.

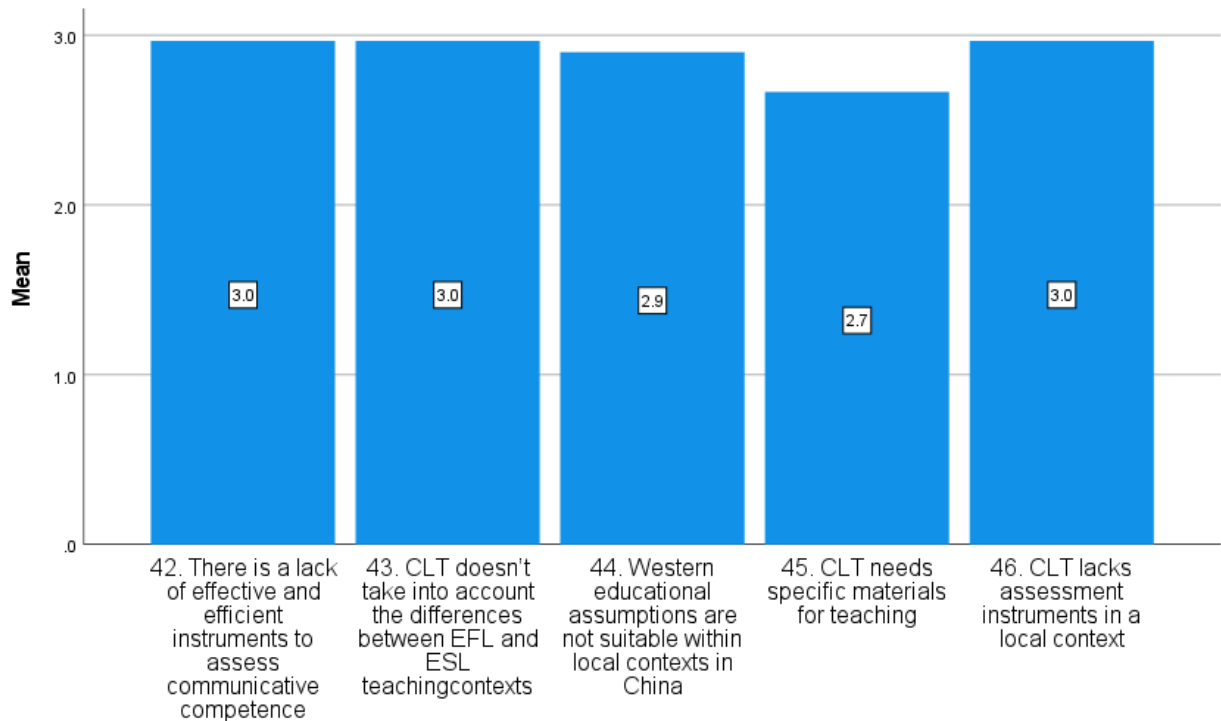
Most teachers are facing the challenge that “There is a lack of effective and efficient instruments to assess communicative competence (mean = 3.0)” due to the need for relevant teaching materials. Implementing CLT can be complicated if the study materials are not accessible enough.

In terms of the incompetency of existing western educational standards in the local setting “CLT doesn’t take into account the differences between EFL and ESL teaching contexts (mean = 3.0)”. We may propose that the concept of CLT was constructed and established in Europe, and its practice in EFL settings can pose a challenge among language educators. Nevertheless, there is a continuing need to consider the gap between theory and practice, necessitating further optimism on the part of EFL teachers regarding the viability of CLT. In pursuit of the appropriate undertaking, learners can be more actively involved in the discussion if the language is based on the local use to establish actual communicative behaviour.

Furthermore, the current assessment system was unsatisfactory for the adoption of CLT (mean = 3.0). In their opinion, CLT is not an effective way for teachers and students to prepare for traditional assessments (Humphries & Burns, 2015). Assessments have a detrimental washback effect on CLT implementation, even in the Dutch environment (Rouffet et al., 2023).

Figure 5

Mean scores of challenges related to CLT



CONCLUSION

The current study investigated on how teachers felt about using CLT in the classroom. The results indicate that they are familiar with the fundamental ideas of CLT. Most of them agree that engaging pupils in communicative activities can raise their level of communication proficiency and develop their speaking skills. If teachers are passionate about using CLT in rural English language classes, they must take communicative activities into account. However, there are reports that teachers have a shortage of real materials and little time for communicative lessons.

The statistics also highlight teachers' misunderstandings of CLT. First off, many of them claimed that CLT is a teacher-centred approach when it is a student-centred one, even though most of them considered instructors as knowledge providers. Teachers are viewed as either observers or facilitators in the CLT teaching methodology. This means that teachers must help pupils learn more effectively in class and monitor their level of academic mastery. As a result, teachers must shift from acting as controllers or translators to acting as facilitators or observers by creating an environment in which students can learn (Kramach, 2006).

The second issue is the misinterpretation of accuracy and fluency. CLT seeks to encourage the development of students' four language abilities in addition to their communication skills. Teachers in rural area of China encountered a variety of problems as they practised CLT that had

to do with the teachers themselves, the students, CLT, and the educational system. They discovered that their English language skills needed improvement, that there were few in-service CLT sessions available, and the training options were particularly scarce in rural locations. They were concerned about the amount of time and real materials that would be needed to adopt CLT. Most of their pupils, they observed, lacked sufficient English language skills, and had a passive learning style with low learning motivation but a desire to engage in communication activities. They considered the educational system to be problematic due to the enormous class sizes (with 90% having more than 40 students), inappropriate curricula and assessment procedures, and lack of administrative support.

Additionally, it is said that CLT lacks assessment and does not take local context into account. Teachers also indicated that the absence of a learning environment or opportunity for practice outside of class can be a significant obstacle. This is because, according to the curriculum, there are only three 45-minute English classes.

The study indicates that CLT teaching practices are not sufficiently investigated and included in China, especially in rural areas. This study, adding to the literature, paved the way for the voices of rural teachers to be heard and provided a coherent perspective on CLT, thus producing a deeper and more historic understanding of it. Administrators will be guided on what should be emphasised in the rural primary school curriculum to improve students' CC in EFL classrooms by revealing the challenges. For example, more English classes should be scheduled.

Great efforts should also be devoted to CLT activities tailored to cultivate their English language competency. The results are expected to benefit students in primary schools with large classroom sizes as well as in primary schools shared with a similar Top-down, centralised educational system. For researchers, the investigation will uncover the perspectives of rural teachers and the challenges they encountered in rural areas. Hopefully, the findings will propose recommendations for how CLT can be integrated into elementary schools in a much more successful and contextualised manner.

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