

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English as Foreign Language (EFL) Classrooms: A Systematic Review of Its Pedagogical Effectiveness and Classroom Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic review of empirical research on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in EFL contexts, with the aim of examining how CLT is implemented in classroom settings, how it influences students' language proficiency, and what contextual challenges shape its effectiveness. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework and included studies published between 2015 and 2025 that were retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords related to CLT, EFL classrooms, instructional effectiveness, implementation challenges, and language proficiency development. The selection process involved title–abstract screening and full-text eligibility assessment based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 18 empirical studies retained from an initial pool of 309 records. The included studies were further classified by thematic focus, research method, and research location, and three key thematic areas were identified: (1) pedagogical effectiveness, (2) impact on students' English proficiency, and (3) implementation challenges. The findings indicate that CLT promotes interaction-oriented instruction and contributes positively to students' communicative competence, particularly in speaking, listening, and classroom engagement, while evidence for grammar, reading, and writing development remains less consistent due to variation in instructional design and assessment emphasis across studies. The review also shows that implementation outcomes are strongly influenced by contextual constraints such as limited teacher training, mixed-ability classes, large enrollments, restricted instructional time, and exam-driven curricula. Overall, the findings suggest that CLT remains a valuable pedagogical approach in EFL contexts, and its effectiveness depends on appropriate implementation and alignment between instructional practices and learners' proficiency levels and classroom realities.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Language Proficiency, Classroom Interaction, Instructional Challenges, Systematic Review

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of global communication and international trade, oral English proficiency remains essential for students and professionals to exchange ideas effectively, even in an era when AI translation tools are widely available. Therefore, it is crucial for EFL learners to enhance their English proficiency in order to convey meaningful messages fluently and appropriately in real-life contexts.

In response to this need, many EFL classrooms worldwide have shifted from traditional language teaching methods—such as grammar-translation and reading-focused instruction—to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Unlike traditional approaches, CLT places greater emphasis on providing students with opportunities for interaction and authentic communication in real-life contexts. This shift also reflects teachers' evolving views on language learning, as many believe that the most effective way to acquire a language is through meaningful exposure to its use in authentic situations (Adem & Berkessa, 2022).

Over the past few decades, a growing body of research on the implementation of CLT in EFL contexts suggests that teachers generally remain optimistic about its positive impact on students, even though various contextual challenges persist (Takal et al., 2021; Gu, 2025; Asmari, 2015). However, despite this positive attitude, many studies have revealed a gap between teachers' perceptions and their actual classroom practices. For example, a case study conducted in three schools in Ethiopia found inconsistencies between the conception and practice of CLT in class, and the reasons for this phenomenon stem from multiple aspects, including teaching philosophy, classroom environment, and student-related factors (Adem & Berkessa, 2022). Similarly, Asmari (2015) pointed out that the performance of students in class still showed their low motivation in English learning, even though these activities were designed based on a communicative syllabus. Moreover, through a questionnaire, the study divided the reasons into four aspects: teachers, students, the education system, and CLT itself. Likewise, other studies have shown that the barriers to effective CLT implementation are complex and context-dependent (Kwon, 2017; Ahmad & Rao, 2013; Huang, 2016; Noori, 2018).

Overall, from the existing empirical studies, it can be observed that most research has focused on examining the effect of CLT on students' overall English proficiency, particularly in terms of speaking and listening skills (e.g., Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Liu & Deris, 2023; Çimen & Çeşme, 2022). Another major research strand has investigated the challenges teachers encounter when implementing CLT. These challenges include contextual constraints, teachers' beliefs, and the mismatch between theory and practice (e.g., Asmari, 2015; Gu, 2025; Takal et al., 2021).

However, although these studies were conducted across diverse EFL contexts, there has been little attempt to systematically synthesize their findings, leaving a fragmented understanding of how CLT affects teaching and learning outcomes in different educational settings. Therefore, this review aims to synthesize recent empirical studies on CLT in EFL contexts, focusing on three aspects: (1) the effectiveness of CLT in classroom practice, (2) its impact on students' language proficiency, and (3) challenges faced by teachers and learners in implementing CLT.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic review approach to synthesize empirical research on CLT conducted in EFL contexts. The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure methodological transparency and rigor (Page et al., 2021).

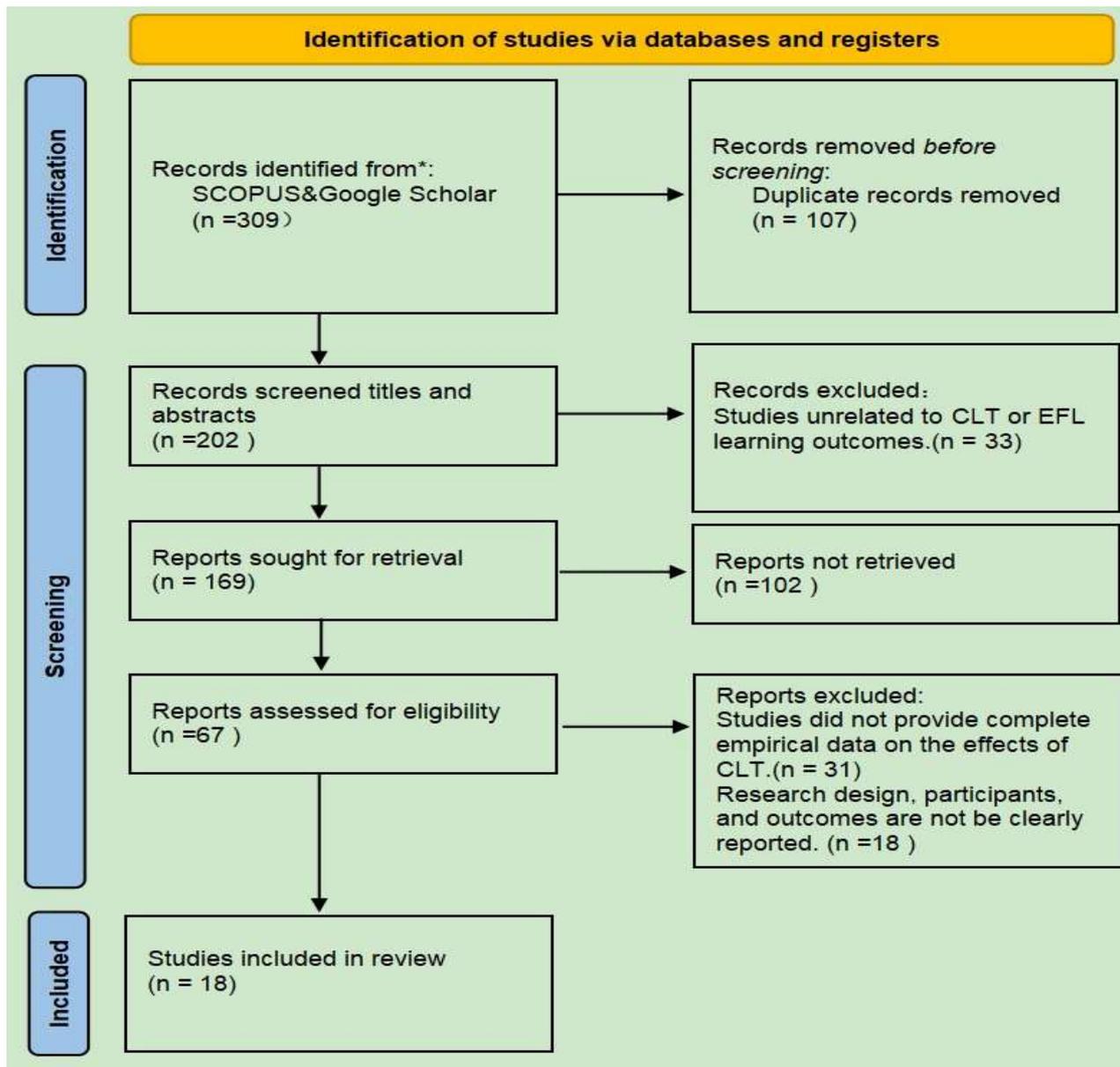
Following the PRISMA 2020 framework, the review consisted of three main phases: identification, screening, and inclusion. Relevant studies were identified through systematic searches of Scopus and Google Scholar. The search was conducted using combinations of keywords such as "Communicative Language Teaching" OR "CLT", "EFL classroom" OR "EFL context", "effectiveness" OR "impact", "implementation" OR

"challenges", and "English proficiency" OR "language skills". Only peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 were considered.

During the screening phase, titles and abstracts were first examined to exclude studies that were not related to CLT in EFL contexts. Studies were excluded if they did not focus on classroom implementation of CLT, were purely theoretical or conceptual, or did not involve EFL learners or teachers. The remaining articles were then subjected to full-text eligibility assessment. Only studies that explicitly examined the pedagogical effectiveness of CLT, its impact on students' English proficiency, or challenges in its implementation were included in the final review.

The initial search yielded 309 records, which were gradually reduced through the screening and eligibility assessment process. After title and abstract screening, irrelevant studies were excluded. Following full-text review, 18 studies that met all inclusion criteria were retained for final analysis. A detailed overview of the study selection process is presented in Figure 1, using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

Figure 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the study selection process for the present systematic review



FINDINGS

To provide a clearer understanding of the thematic trends in recent CLT research, the studies included in this review were analyzed in terms of their key areas of focus. Because many articles covered more than one dimension of CLT, each study was assigned to all categories that reflected its major contributions. As a result, three thematic areas were identified: (1) pedagogical effectiveness, (2) impact on students’ English proficiency, and (3) implementation challenges. The distribution of studies across these categories, along with the corresponding authors, is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 Focus Areas of the Reviewed Studies

Main focus	Authors
Instructional effectiveness	Adem & Berkessa (2022); Berezenko et al.(2022); Akdağ-Çimen & Hatice Çeşme (2022); Mora & Mora-Plaza (2023); Chen (2020); Doeur (2022); Islam Khan et al. (2024); Liu & Diana Deris (2023)

English proficiency outcomes	Berezenko et al.(2022); Farooq (2015); Akdağ-Çimen & Hatice Çeşme (2022); Chiroque Chero (2022);Chen (2020); Liu & Diana Deris (2023);Polrodi & Pourhosein Gilakjani (2021)
Implementation challenges	Adem & Berkessa (2022); Gu (2025); Asmari (2015); Takal et al. (2021); Shi et al.(2019); Islam Khan et al. (2024); Islam (2021); Jeon, J. & Yin, J. (2022); Fattah, A. & Saidalvi, A. (2019)

Research Method

The reviewed studies demonstrate substantial methodological diversity, as researchers adopt different approaches to address their research questions. As shown in **Table 2**, quantitative approach was the most frequently used among the reviewed studies. Additionally, mixed-method and case study designs each account for 4 studies (22%), while purely qualitative research is the least common, representing only 17%. This pattern suggests that researchers tend to favour quantitative approaches when examining the effectiveness of CLT implementation, likely because such methods allow for measurable outcomes and statistical comparisons. However, such designs often require careful planning, trained implementers, and supportive instructional environments; therefore, implementation can be difficult in certain contexts.

Table 2 Research Methods of Reviewed Studies

Method	Number	Percentage
Quantitative (survey, questionnaire, quasi-experiment)	7	39%
Qualitative (interview, observation)	3	17%
Mixed-Method	4	22%
Case Study	4	22%
Total	18	100%

Research Location

As shown in **Table 3**, the 18 studies included in this review were conducted across diverse geographical regions. Compared to other regions, Asian countries—particularly developing contexts—demonstrated greater research activity related to CLT. In contrast, studies conducted in Africa and Latin America together account for only 10% of the total, possibly because research output in English language education is comparatively limited in these regions.

In addition, 18% of the included studies come from Europe, which may reflect relatively stable adoption of communicative approaches in European educational policy.

Table 3 Geographic Distribution of the Studies

Region	Countries	Number	Percentage
Asia	China, Taiwan, South Korea, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia(*2), Afghanistan	13	72%

Africa	Ethiopia	1	5%
Europe	Ukraine, Turkey, Spain	3	18%
Latin America	Peru	1	5%
Total		18	100%

Instructional Effectiveness

Across the reviewed studies, the instructional effectiveness of CLT was primarily reflected in recurring classroom patterns rather than isolated teaching techniques. Three interrelated aspects consistently emerged: shifts in teacher roles, the design of communicative tasks, and learners' engagement during classroom interaction.

First, a common finding across studies is the redefinition of the teacher's role from a knowledge transmitter to a learning facilitator. In CLT-oriented classrooms, teachers tended to reduce teacher-centered instruction and attribute more time to student-centered activities, allowing learners to engage in peer interaction and collaborative problem-solving. Rather than dominating classroom discourse, teachers frequently monitored group work, offered clarification when necessary, and provided interactional support during communicative activities (Adem & Berkessa, 2022). This shift was widely regarded as a key instructional feature distinguishing CLT from traditional language teaching.

Second, communicative task design played a central role in shaping instructional effectiveness. Pair work and group discussion were the most frequently adopted activity formats, enabling learners to negotiate meaning and use English for authentic communicative purposes (Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Chen, 2020). In some studies, more structured communicative tasks were implemented to target specific language components. For example, map-task activities were used to promote phonological development by encouraging learners to convey precise information through spoken interaction (Mora & Mora-Plaza, 2023). In addition, interactional scaffolding strategies, such as guided questioning and teacher-mediated feedback, were reported to support learner participation and sustain classroom interaction (Shi et al., 2019).

Third, learners' classroom engagement was commonly reported as a positive outcome of CLT implementation. Several studies documented increased student participation, reduced speaking anxiety, and more spontaneous use of the target language during communicative activities (Akdağ-Çimen & Çeşme, 2022; Berezenko et al., 2022; Liu & Diana Deris, 2023). Questionnaire data further indicated that many students expressed favourable attitudes toward CLT-based instruction, particularly with regard to opportunities for interaction and communicative skill development (Berezenko et al., 2022). Classroom observations suggested that when communicative tasks were appropriately aligned with learners' proficiency levels, interaction tended to be more sustained and meaningful (Chen, 2020).

Nevertheless, instructional effectiveness was not uniform across all contexts. In several studies, communicative tasks failed to generate deep or balanced participation, especially among lower-proficiency learners (Islam, 2021; Liu & Diana Deris, 2023). Time constraints and delayed feedback were also reported to limit the efficiency of classroom interaction, reducing opportunities for timely scaffolding and reflection (Chen, 2020; Islam Khan et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the instructional impact of CLT is highly sensitive to classroom conditions and implementation quality, an issue that will be further examined in the subsequent section on implementation challenges.

Language Proficiency

Language ability in the reviewed studies was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammatical competence. Overall, the findings consistently suggest that CLT has a positive impact on learners' English proficiency, particularly in oral and interactional skills.

Across the reviewed literature, the strongest and most consistent gains were reported in speaking-related outcomes. Several studies documented improvements in learners' speaking fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and interactional competence following CLT-oriented instruction (Farooq, 2015; Akdağ-Çimen & Çeşme, 2022; Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Mora & Mora-Plaza, 2023). These gains were often attributed to increased opportunities for meaningful interaction, negotiation of meaning, and communicative task engagement. In addition, CLT-based instruction was frequently found to enhance learners' listening comprehension, as students were exposed to more authentic input and real-time communicative exchanges compared with traditional, form-focused instruction (Polrodi & Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2021).

Beyond oral skills, several studies examined the effects of CLT on grammatical development. Findings generally indicate that learners in CLT-oriented classrooms demonstrated comparable or superior grammatical accuracy relative to those taught through traditional language teaching approaches (Berezenko et al., 2022; Chiroque Chero, 2022). These outcomes suggest that grammatical development can be supported through communicative instruction, particularly when attention to form is embedded within meaning-focused interaction.

Evidence related to reading and writing development was more limited, but available studies still point to potential benefits. For instance, Shi et al. (2019) reported that interactional scaffolding within a genre-based, CLT-informed instructional framework facilitated learners' writing development. Additionally, some studies observed improvements in specific sub-skills, such as sentence construction and discourse organization, indicating that communicative instruction may contribute to broader linguistic development beyond oral proficiency (Berezenko et al., 2022).

Taken together, the reviewed studies suggest that CLT is effective in promoting multiple dimensions of language ability, with particularly robust evidence for speaking and listening development. However, the scope and magnitude of proficiency gains vary across studies, highlighting the influence of instructional design and classroom conditions on learning outcomes.

Challenges in Implementing CLT

Despite the generally positive outcomes associated with CLT, all reviewed studies reported challenges that constrained its effective implementation. These challenges were found to be multifaceted and context-dependent, arising from teacher-related, learner-related, institutional, and systemic factors.

A frequently reported challenge concerns teachers' limited professional preparation for CLT. Several studies indicated that teachers lacked systematic training in communicative pedagogy, leading to partial or superficial implementation of CLT principles (Farooq, 2015; Chen, 2020; Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Gu, 2025). In some cases, misconceptions about CLT—such as equating it solely with group work or oral practice—resulted in activities that were communicative in form but not in function. This mismatch between teachers' stated beliefs and actual classroom practices often undermined the intended instructional effectiveness of CLT.

Learner-related factors also posed significant challenges. Mixed proficiency levels within the same classroom were commonly reported to affect participation patterns, with higher-proficiency learners dominating interaction while lower-proficiency students struggled to engage meaningfully (Islam, 2021; Liu & Diana Deris, 2023). Such imbalances made it difficult for teachers to design tasks that were simultaneously accessible and challenging for all learners, thereby limiting the overall effectiveness of communicative activities.

In addition, structural constraints within instructional contexts frequently restricted the implementation of CLT. Large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient opportunities for extended interaction were repeatedly identified as barriers to effective task-based communication (Farooq, 2015; Shi et al., 2019; Jeon & Yin, 2022; Islam Khan et al., 2024). Under these conditions, teachers reported difficulties in monitoring group work, providing timely feedback, and ensuring active participation across learners.

Beyond classroom-level factors, broader educational systems also influenced CLT implementation. Examination-oriented curricula and assessment practices that prioritize grammatical accuracy and test

performance often discouraged sustained communicative practice in the classroom (Takal et al., 2021; Jeon & Yin, 2022; Liu & Diana Deris, 2023). Furthermore, limited exposure to English outside the classroom reduced learners' motivation to engage in communicative use of the language, further constraining the effectiveness of CLT.

Overall, the findings indicate that while CLT holds considerable pedagogical potential, its successful implementation depends on supportive instructional conditions, adequate teacher preparation, and alignment with institutional and assessment frameworks.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this review was to synthesize recent empirical studies on CLT and to answer three research questions regarding its instructional implementation, its impact on students' language proficiency, and the challenges that affect its effectiveness. Overall, the findings reveal both positive trends and persistent difficulties, showing that CLT continues to be widely promoted in EFL contexts but remains challenging in practice.

Research Question 1

The reviewed studies indicate that most teachers attempted to adopt core CLT principles, such as prioritizing interaction, reducing teacher-fronted instruction, and creating opportunities for student negotiation of meaning. These observations are consistent with long-standing descriptions of CLT classrooms, where teachers act more as facilitators rather than sole knowledge providers. The shift toward student-centered learning and more task-based communication supports earlier views that CLT works best when students have chances to use the language meaningfully and in real situations (Ellis, 2003).

However, the results also show that the degree of implementation varied significantly across contexts. Some teachers used communicative tasks effectively, but some teachers used activities called "communicative," even though they did not involve real information exchange or meaningful goals. This gap reflects what previous studies have described as "CLT in name only," where teachers hold limited understandings of CLT principles (Littlewood, 2007). The inconsistency also reflects the influence of teachers' prior training, as reported in several quantitative studies where insufficient knowledge led to partial or inaccurate adoption of communicative methods (Farooq, 2015).

Furthermore, while pair and group work were commonly used, the quality of interaction depended heavily on task design. Research has repeatedly emphasized that communicative tasks only function well when they are level-appropriate, meaningful, and supported by scaffolding (Nation, 2013). The studies reviewed in this paper demonstrated similar findings: carefully designed tasks enhanced participation, whereas poorly structured ones resulted in minimal engagement. Therefore, CLT implementation appears successful only when instructional conditions—such as teacher preparation, task selection, and classroom structure—support the intended communicative outcomes.

Research Question 2

Across the reviewed studies, one clear finding is that evidence for the effectiveness of CLT is strongest in speaking and listening, while research on reading and writing remains comparatively limited. This imbalance is consistent with the historical development of CLT, which has long centered on real-time communication and interaction (Littlewood, 2014). Because oral performance is directly exercised through pair work, group discussions, and negotiation of meaning, the reviewed studies showed more consistent gains in fluency and confidence—findings that align with earlier empirical work demonstrating that communicative interaction naturally promotes oral development (Goh & Burns, 2012).

In contrast, the evidence for listening and grammar gains was more varied. The inconsistency may be because different studies used different teaching approaches. Some studies included more structured activities or built-in attention to language forms, while others used open-ended communicative tasks without much guidance.

This pattern reflects broader arguments that interaction alone is not always sufficient for developing listening skills or grammatical accuracy; rather, explicit attention to form within communicative contexts tends to lead to more robust outcomes (Ellis, 2016).

The relatively small number of studies examining reading and writing also reflects a longstanding research trend. Literacy skills have often been viewed as less “communicative” within early CLT frameworks, resulting in fewer empirical studies in these areas (Harmer, 2015). However, the few studies that used genre-based or scaffolded writing tasks still showed positive effects, supporting earlier claims that communicative approaches can help writing development when they are well structured (Hyland, 2007). Still, because the evidence is limited, it is difficult to make strong generalizations about CLT's impact on reading and writing.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that the impact of CLT is skill-dependent and shaped by how closely instructional practices align with communicative principles. Stronger results in speaking and interaction reflect the natural fit between CLT and oral communication, whereas the limited and varied findings for literacy skills highlight a research imbalance rather than inherent limitations of CLT. These observations point to the need for broader and more balanced empirical attention across different language skill domains.

Research Question 3

Despite its advantages, the reviewed studies also highlight several challenges that continue to hinder effective CLT implementation. These challenges can be divided into three broad categories: teacher-related, learner-related, and system-related factors, which align with previous analyses of CLT adoption in EFL countries (Butler, 2011).

Teacher-related constraints were the most common. Many teachers lacked adequate training in communicative pedagogy, leading to misconceptions about core principles or uncertainty about how to design effective tasks. This issue is widely discussed in the CLT literature, where researchers argue that successful implementation requires not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills in managing communicative classrooms (Littlewood, 2007).

Learner-related challenges, particularly uneven proficiency levels, also played a significant role. When low-proficiency students struggled to participate in communicative activities, teachers found it difficult to match task requirements with students' ability levels. Similar concerns have been described in Asian EFL contexts, where mixed-ability classes often reduce students' willingness to communicate and increase classroom anxiety (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

System-level constraints, including exam-oriented assessment systems and limited English use outside the classroom, were also major obstacles. These findings strongly reflect earlier research arguing that CLT is difficult to sustain in environments where high-stakes tests prioritize grammatical accuracy and discrete-point knowledge (Liu & Diana Deris, 2023). When the broader educational system does not support communicative goals, teachers may revert to traditional instruction despite positive attitudes toward CLT.

Overall, the challenges identified in this review reinforce the idea that CLT effectiveness depends not only on classroom practice but also on institutional support, policy alignment, and sociocultural conditions. Without a supportive environment, the full potential of CLT is unlikely to be realized.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this review shows that CLT holds clear potential for supporting students' communicative development, but its effectiveness depends heavily on how it is implemented. Across studies, teachers made noticeable shifts toward more interaction-based instruction, and many learners benefited—particularly in speaking, listening, and communicative engagement. However, the evidence for grammar, reading, and writing development remained uneven, reflecting both methodological variation and the limited number of studies focusing on these areas. The review also highlights that the challenges commonly reported—such as teachers' limited training, mixed proficiency levels, large classes, and exam-driven pressures—continue to shape how CLT works in real

classrooms. Taken together, these findings suggest that while CLT remains a promising approach, its success relies on supportive conditions, realistic expectations, and context-sensitive classroom practices.

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