# FACTORS HINDERING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN LIBYAN UNIVERSITY ENGLISH CLASSES

**Ahmed Athawadi[i]**
Faculty of Arts,
Sabratha University,
Libya

**Abstract:**

In recent years, communicative language teaching in Libya has been the focus in English language teaching. This study aimed to point out the factors that hinder the implementation of communicative language teaching in Libyan university English classes in EFL context. An interview has been used to gather data from eight university teachers from two Libyan universities. The findings identified the factors that impede the use of CLT related to students, teachers, resources, and the Libyan educational system. Specifically, some barriers were mainly due to the lack of teacher training, insufficient teaching resources, non-qualified students, and the educational system not meeting the goals of modern teaching methods. A few recommendations have been provided for teachers and policy makers to encourage successful implementation of CLT.

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, ESL, EFL

## 1. Introduction

English language has been the medium of instruction around the world and it is the most widely used language in all areas of study. This made researchers and educators work on finding the best and most reliable English teaching methods in order to serve the needs of English in the fields of science, technology, and business.

Like other EFL teaching settings, Libya has implemented the traditional teaching methods for long years. Traditional methods have failed to improve the students' English language abilities especially being introduced in EFL settings where there were no ways of practicing English in real contexts. However, in CLT methods of teaching, English is practiced through activities that are similar to real situations and the context of those situations is taken in consideration. In order to ensure the best practices of CLT,

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[i] Correspondence: email athawadi85@gmail.com

it is important to investigate the current practices and find ways on how to overcome the obstacles that hinder the adequate implementation of CLT. Very few studies have been conducted in Libya to find out the views of university teachers on the application of CLT. However, this study investigates the factors that hinder the implementation of CLT with the recommendation that the teachers' views will be taken in consideration in any policy making or any endeavor to improve the practices of CLT in Libyan university English classes.

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

While international education systems have called for the implementation of the latest teaching methods of language teaching, scholars have concluded that there were clear issues between policy and practice (Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003). Different studies reported that EFL teaching was still based on the traditional approach (Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003; and Wang, 2003). To add, other factors that had a clear influence on CLT practices were large classes, students' low proficiency, and test-oriented teaching. Teachers feel that CLT places a heavy demand on them that is why they hardly accept to use this method. As reported by Medgyes (1986), CLT puts greater demands on the teacher than certain other widely used approaches. CLT being a student-centered approach places a heavy responsibility on teachers not only during class but also after class. Students' unpredicted answers and reactions require a teacher to be well prepared and interact with the students as 'natural' as possible. Unlike traditional teacher-dominated classes, CLT classes require teachers to use a wider range of management skills.

In addition, to be able to use language on high levels and communicate with ease, students need higher levels of language proficiency. Some EFL teachers did not welcome the implementation of CLT for the reason that it may appear "chaotic" because it is mainly student-centered where the student is the center of attention and who is doing most of the activities and talk. The complaints on classes being chaotic are inevitable, as interaction of students with others requires at least some "noise". In a communicative activity, a classroom is far from being quiet. The students do most of the speaking and the scene of a classroom during a communicative activity is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

One of the other problems often recognized is that teachers themselves cannot speak English well. This could create a great difficulty among learners especially if the goal is teach students how to speak the language.

In certain local contexts, there were situational constraints affecting the successful performance of teachers trying to implement CLT. Many research studies showed that teachers preferred to use form-based instruction because they felt the pressure of helping students pass the exams (Karim, 2004). In addition, research findings suggested that difficulties arose among teachers when managing group work for large classes (Tsai, 2007; Liao, 2003; Karim, 2004).

In some studies, Chinese teachers of English had difficulties with teaching cultural aspects of language which was due to lack of experience in an English speaking country (Liao, 2003; Yu, 2001). Students' resistance to learning and low-English proficiency was among the problems that deterred Chinese teachers from practicing CLT as reported by (Liao, 2003; Tsai, 2007). All these factors will definitely affect the teachers' performance and efforts in trying to implement CLT in EFL classes. It is also important to focus on the teachers views in the discussion. To be specific, since research on this aspect in Libyan university settings has been scarce, this study intends to fill that gap.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Brief Background of CLT

During the 1970s, several language experts worked on creating a system that was based largely on portions or units that corresponded to a component of the learner's needs and which were at the same time built upon a systematic relationship with other portions (Va Ek and Alexander 1980: 6). During the year 1972, the British linguist D.A. Wilkins was able to come up with a definition of language that was functional and communicative, and which worked as a base for the development of the CLT syllabuses. He analyzed language according to what the learner needed to understand and express which is meaning. He deviated from describing language using the traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary. Wilkins focused on describing language according to systems of meanings that had communicative uses. Through his book *Notional Syllabuses* (1976), Wilkins was known for his great impact on developing syllabuses in the Council of Europe.

The Council made great use of his semantic and communicative analysis of language and established a first-level communicative language syllabus. The success and quick development of the communicative approach or what is referred to as the Communicative Language Teaching was due to the work of the Council of Europe and the work of famous linguists such as Wilkins, Widdowson, Christopher Brumfit, and other British Applied Linguists. They worked on theoretical basis for communicative, functional approach to language teaching. Ideas have been written in textbooks and language teaching specialists quickly accepted the new principles of language teaching. Curriculum developers also and governments gave great credit and support to this approach.

After looking back at the different teaching methods, it is clear that many of the methods focus on having students produce correct structures in class but what eventually happens is that students fail to use those structures in real communication. This is due to the fact that language is fundamentally social (Halliday, 1973). In an EFL classroom, students need to use the language to perform linguistic aspects for interactive purposes (Widdowson, 1976). Communication in the target language needs not only the linguistic usage skills but also using the language in everyday life

naturally. So, communication requires communicative competence rather than linguistic competence (Hymes, 1972).

Communicative competence is defined as what a speaker needs to know in order to communicate in a speech community (Hymes, 1972). For example, when using language in the real world, the speaker not only should produce an accurate structure but should also take into account the context in which the sentence is used. Competence is viewed as "*the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language which the speaker-listener possesses*" (Hymes, 1972). Such facts led linguists to formulate approaches and methods that consider the interactive and social role of the language.

One of these key approaches is Communicative Language Teaching. CLT can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom (Richards, 2001). Compared to teacher-centered approach where students are regarded as knowledge receivers and teachers as givers, CLT puts more emphasis on the social relationship between teachers and students. This teaching approach gives them the feeling of ownership of their learning and therefore motivates them (Brown, 1994). This in return creates a positive environment where students can practice the English language more effectively.

## 2.2 Previous Studies

Implementing new teaching methods that carried out communicative purposes was a major concern for English language teachers throughout the world. Gahin and Mayhill (2001) conducted a research and showed that two main concerns were against the application of CLT in Egypt. The first was due to economic constraints which include lack of resources, low wages, and large classes which lack facilities. Second are cultural factors like passive – student traditions, negative group work attitudes, and influences of colleagues in other teacher-dominated subjects. Another study in the United Arab Emirates by Deckert (2004) showed that the reason behind failing to apply CLT was because of the excessive teacher talk and because of the student and teacher doubts on the effectiveness of such approach. The excessive teacher talks when attempting to correct students' mistakes and when trying to explain certain key points caused them to refrain from actively participating communicatively during English language communication inside the classroom. Rod Ellis (1994) conducted a study in Vietnam and pointed out certain limitations that hindered the use of CLT. Limitations of using CLT were lack of exposure to authentic language, class size, and grammar-based examinations.

Another study by Diana Ansarey (2012) in Bangladesh showed that teachers when trying to implement CLT in their classes have undergone many difficulties. Some of the challenges were non-qualified teachers, class size, and curricula, and shortage of equipment. Lui (2005) researched the effectiveness of CLT implementation in Taiwan. He concluded that grammar based examinations were the reason behind the failure of employing CLT in the classroom. A research was conducted in Turkey by Incecay and

Incecay (2009) on measuring the efficiency of CLT on EFL learners. They found out that using CLT activities in parallel with the traditional approach positively affected the learning of EFL learners. Implementing CLT in an EFL setting had a lot to do with the different beliefs of teachers towards certain CLT concepts and their practices in the classroom. Misconceptions are largely centered on traditional grammatical knowledge and its teaching, large classes, and lack of communicative competence. (Richards 2006; Sakui, 2004; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Thompson, 1996; Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Another study conducted in Greece by Karavas-Doukas (1996) on the attitudes of teachers towards CLT. He came to a result that teachers favor the use of traditional teaching methods even though their curriculum is CLT based. In this regard, either the teachers were not able to comprehend the basic principles of CLT or they had no intentions to employ CLT in their classrooms. Anderson (1993) conducted a research in China and reached a number of challenges. One of those challenges was that there were not enough teachers practicing the use of CLT. Also, there were problems in assessing and evaluating the performance of students. In Cuba Valdes and Jhones (1991) pointed out some challenges related to the implementation of CLT in the classroom. The main challenges were low level teachers in English who have problems in designing courses that meet the students' needs.

## 3. Material and Methods

In order to investigate and analyze the perceptions and ideas of the participants, which are based on their teaching experiences, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in order to answer the research question fully. Open-ended questions were asked by the researcher. The interviews were conducted in English language giving the flexibility for asking follow-up questions.

### 3.1 Participants
Interviews were conducted for the purpose of collecting qualitative data. The participants were eight university teachers from two Libyan universities that work on integrating CLT into their English curriculum.

### 3.2 Data Collection
In order to investigate the factors that hinder the implementation of CLT in Libyan universities, open-ended question were asked. The interviews were recorded after receiving consent from the interviewees. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. Each interview was transcribed into written form so they can be studied in detail and linked with analytic coding.

### 3.3 Data Analysis
The interviews' responses were categorized into themes which were identified by the researcher who used thematic analysis of the data. In order to reach a new and good

understanding of the data, a process of separating the data into small units of text was applied. After that, in order to reach a high level of understanding of the data, another process of naming and categorization was employed.

### 3.4 Research Question
This study aimed to explore the factors that hinder the Libyan EFL university teachers' implementation of CLT. The research question is as follows:
- What factors hinder the implementation of CLT by Libyan EFL university teachers?

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results of the Research Question
Factors hindering the implementation of communicative language teaching were categorized according to four different subcategories:
  a) students;
  b) teachers;
  c) teaching resources;
  d) educational system.

### a) Student Factors
The interviewees mentioned very important difficulties concerning the implementation of CLT. Three major problems related to students were 1) low English proficiency 2) resistance to participation 3) confidence and readiness for CLT.
- **Low English Proficiency**

    The interviewees pointed out that the low English proficiency of students contributed to the inadequate application of CLT. Five Interviewees (T2, T3, T4, T6, and T7) reported that low English proficiency is one of the constraints in practicing CLT. They agreed that if students' levels are lower than intermediate level, they would find it hard to communicate especially when engaged in tasks which depend on fluency-focused and problem solving activities.

    > T6: *"Students' low English proficiency is the biggest difficulty for me at least. I was having difficulties in conducting oral communicative activities with students since students did not have sufficient proficiency in English."*

    > T2: *"If the level of my students is low, there will be lower chances of communication and lower chances of implementing CLT efficiently."*

- **Resistance to Participation**

    Another factor that was a major concern for teachers implementing CLT in their courses is when students resist participation. Interviewees (T1, T3, T4, T5, T7, and T8)

identified that resistance to participation is one of the obstacles to practicing CLT. Some interviewees agreed that the reason for this resistance is a matter of being shy as well as face saving. Others agreed that it is the level of English and lack of vocabulary which keeps them refraining from participation.

> T8: *"The reason, I think, is because that they are not used to such teaching which requires them to be active and be the main focus."*

> T7: *"I have encountered many incidents of students not willing to participate. I think that was due to a lot of reasons. Anxiety, peer pressure, lack of knowledge, unsuccessful experiences with group work, and shyness are the reasons I think are behind this resistance."*

Additionally, T1 pointed out that mixed gender classes and students being passive affects the implementation of CLT.

> T1: *"I think mixed gender classes hinders them from participation. Maybe they are shy. During school time, teachers did not encourage them to participate and they got used to being passive in class."*

- **Confidence and Readiness for CLT**
  The interviewees viewed confidence and readiness for CLT as important factors that failed to help them in implementing CLT in the best way. Interviewees (T7, T3, T8, and T1) indicated that students were taught in very traditional ways in their early levels and it would be hard for them to absorb a different and demanding way of learning. Students need encouragement to make them more confident to take a positive role in class. One interviewee (T1) stated that students are not confident with their speaking levels and being less confident relates back to their personal background and to the way their teachers treated them during lower levels and high school.

> T7: *"Students are not really prepared for CLT learning environment because it is not used by many teachers; they either lack the knowledge of CLT, or simply because it is a demanding approach. Once learners experience the CLT atmosphere, they might reject the idea that the teacher is only a facilitator."*

**b) Teacher Factors**
The interviewees pointed out a few difficulties that hindered their implementation of CLT in their English classes. Two major problems related to teachers were 1) Lack of knowledge, language and teaching skills and 2) Lack of teacher training programs.
- **Lack of Knowledge, Language and Teaching Skills**
  Four interviewees (T3, T7, T2, and T6) mentioned that teachers do not possess the knowledge and theory behind the implementation of CLT. In addition, some

teachers are low proficient users of the English language. Applying CLT in the perfect manner requires a lot of preparation by the teachers and as claimed by (T2) teachers get bored by time and without motivation and reward, they choose what is easy for them.

> T2: *"another problem is that teachers copy their teachers' way of teaching, which they think that it worked for them. That refers back to the lack of knowledge about the latest teaching methods."*

> T7: *"sometimes teachers feel bored to listen to their students speaking for most of the time. Also there are some teachers who feel they are not able to teach communicatively because they themselves are low-proficient. Moreover, some English teachers are reluctant to use this kind of approach because it needs preparation, the ability to monitor, time and effort."*

- **Lack of Teacher Training Programs**

The interviewees indicated that to practice CLT efficiently, teachers need continuous teacher training programs. They reported that lack of training deters their successful implementation of CLT.

Four interviewees (T1, T2, T4, and T5) named lack of teacher training programs as one of the major barriers against the implementation of CLT. The teacher training programs for university teachers were not sufficient and they take place randomly.

> T2: *"…the lack of training is a problem. Even when there are training programs, teachers do not take them serious."*

The four interviewees agreed that there are no systematic training programs designed for university teachers. Teachers have to develop their teaching skills through private training institutions and they have to pay for it themselves. They claimed that the university sometimes implements optional short courses in the field of teacher training but only a few get a chance to participate due to lack of facilities and trainers.

> T5: *"Considering that we live in the internet era and the sheer amount of information available to teachers, I would not say it is lack of knowledge; I would rather see it as lack of training."*

Theoretical knowledge can be reached easily but practice and acquisition of practical skills requires well-designed training workshops and a lot of observed teaching practice hours and feedback from skillful teacher trainers.

**c) Teaching Resources**

The interviewees indicated that having teaching resources when practicing CLT is very important to successfully implement CLT in their English classes. Six interviewees (T1,

T2, T4, T6, T7, and T8) agreed that it is very important to have adequate teaching resources in their English language classrooms. They think that when classes are not equipped with audio and visual aids, it makes it hard for them to achieve their lesson's goals.

> T7: *"CLT involves active learning where students experience role-playing, small group discussions, playing games, short written exercises, and reaction to video. All of these tasks need audio and visual aids, which make their class successful, interesting and authentic. If the teacher lacks such facilities, he/she needs to be creative and use limited resources to get the job done."*

> T1: *"I tried CLT with the use of facilities and have not taught without them. I think things will not go well without these facilities. They are important."*

Libyan universities lack funding from the Ministry of Education and most of them lack teaching resources and adequate facilities. Some teachers purchase their own projector in order to use it in their classes. Students sometimes help teachers with tools like scissors, sticky notes, colored paper, glue, etc. The majority of classrooms are not designed to be equipped with technology devices. Floors are not designed to reduce the echo of sound. Classrooms are not equipped with curtains to reduce the light when using a projector. All this makes it hard to use any visual or audio devices that are important for a CLT English class.

Visual aids can be very helpful in an EFL teaching setting as Mannan (2005) stated that they 'help the teacher to clarify, establish, correlate and coordinate accurate concepts, interpretations and appreciations, and enable him to make learning more concrete, effective, interesting, inspirational, meaningful and vivid' (p.108).

> T2: *"…facilities will create a difference in my classroom. Even though I manage with simple material and it works with me, students do prefer technology in their classes."*

### d) Educational System
The fourth group of factors that hinders the implementation of CLT is related to the educational system in Libya. Two major problems were pointed out: 1) large classes, and 2) test-oriented teaching.

- **Large classes**

Seven interviewees (T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T7, and T8) reported that large classes are one of the constraints in practicing CLT. The interviewees stated that it is difficult to implement CLT in the EFL classroom with a high number of students. They agreed that it is hard to manage a class that has more than 25 students. The reason is that it is hard to give equal opportunities to each student to participate and take part in any given task. Classroom management is a problem also when dealing with large numbers of students. It is hard to manage a large class properly because using CLT involves

interaction and moving around in order to perform some activities. Furthermore, research has also shown that teachers encounter problems managing group work in large classes (Al-Jarf, 2006).

Another issue in practicing CLT in a large class is classroom monitoring and evaluation. All interviewees agreed that it is very hard to monitor and evaluate the performance of each student when the number of students is big. According to Shamim et al (2007) in large classes, it is hard to continuously evaluate the students' work. To that, Blatchford et al., (2007) added that it is difficult to identify learners' problems because of the lack of on-going assessment of the performance of students. In addition, it is hard for teachers to provide appropriate feedback needed for improving their language skills.

> T7: *"Noise is one of the biggest problems that might face the teacher. With a high number of students, it is difficult to control such noise. As a result, this might be a tiring method for traditional teachers and they might avoid using this approach."*

Shamim et al. (2007) reinforced the idea in which he indicated that teachers in large classes have problems establishing discipline in their classrooms dealing with the increasing noise level. This noise level makes it hard for students to hear the teacher because of the distraction created by their peers (Al-Jarf, 2006).

- **Test-oriented teaching**

Seven interviewees (T1, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, and T8) identified test-oriented teaching as a limitation to apply CLT. In order to graduate from a Libyan university, it is mandatory that you pass exams. The interviewees stated that the obligation to pass the exams puts a lot of pressure on students. Students will not be aiming at the benefit from each course but grades are what matters. As a result, students will be studying for exams only.

> T1: *"Students are worried all the time about exams and what is included and what is not. This creates a problem. They study for exams."*

> T7: *"Students study to get high grades instead of achieving a good understanding of the subject matter. As a result, they will lack many of the soft skills such as, creative thinking, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and time management."*

In summary, based on interviewees' reports, factors hindering the implementation of CLT were students' low English proficiency; resistance to participation; students' confidence and readiness for CLT. Moreover, teachers' lack of knowledge, language, and teaching skills; lack of teacher training programs; lack of teaching resources. Additionally, large classes; and test-oriented teaching.

## 5. Research Findings and Discussion

With reference to the interviews, factors that hindered the application of CLT were related to students, teachers, resources, and the educational system. First, the interviewees pointed out that students play a vital role in practicing CLT. The low level of students results in inadequate application of CLT. The students' resistance to participation as well as their confidence and readiness for CLT also weaken the chances of a successful implementation of CLT. These findings support previous studies by (Liao, 2003; Tsai, 2007), which indicated that teachers had difficulties implementing communicative language teaching and performing communicative based activities with students who are low in level and also who resist participation. This suggests that teachers should be trained to overcome these problems by undergoing training on how to motivated learners to participate. Teachers need also to be aware of how to involve low-level students in their classes by applying certain strategies that develop their language and communicative skills.

Second, interviewees also insisted on the importance of teachers in the application of CLT. They indicated that teachers need to be involved in continuous training programs. They should be encouraged to experiment with CLT. The university should provide the teachers with experts who should be available to help teachers with problems or to seek advice from whenever they are challenged with constraints that hinder the application of CLT. These results echo those from previous studies by Valdes and Jhones (1991) in which they indicated that one of the main challenges of applying CLT was the low level of teachers.

Third, the successful practice of CLT as suggested by the interviewees needs the university to provide teachers with a variety of teaching resources as well as to equip the classes with the technology needed to help with meeting with the objectives of the courses. The learning styles of students should be considered as there are students who are visual learners and others auditory. This kind of learning styles suggests the availability of audio and visual technology.

Finally, on one hand Libyan universities encourage the use of the latest and most effective teaching methods but on the other hand, large classes and test-oriented teaching impede the effective practice of CLT. As suggested by interviewees, the exam policies of Libyan universities should adopt a flexible system of grading. It is also suggested that teachers should be given the right to choose their own assessment and grading method as long as it adheres to the main assessment policy. Other types of evaluation should be introduced to teachers. Students' performance should not only be evaluated through exams. Interviewees also suggested that large classes should be reduced so that more opportunities will be given to students and more practice through communicative activities will take place. Noise will be reduced and more discipline will be practiced. Classes as a result will be managed properly. These results support previous studies by Al-Jarf (2006) who indicated that teachers encounter problems managing group work in large classes.

## 5.1 Implications and Conclusions

This study is based on teachers' views on how to apply CLT in a Libyan university setting. It provided theoretical implications and practical experience of English language university teachers. Policy makers are also an integral part of this study in order to approve certain procedures in applying CLT properly.

First, based on insights from this study, Libyan university students are generally shy and lack confidence especially when they need to individually present a topic or act in front of class. This relates back to how they were taught in their previous education. It was mainly teacher-centered classes where teachers are the authority in class and very few student-centered activities were taking place. They were not trained to speak in public neither to act or give individual presentations. The finding suggests that teachers should adapt certain strategies to involve shy students and raise the confidence of learners by motivating them through appraisal and grades. Libyan universities should also seek help from social workers in order to provide help to students who are anxious and less confident.

Second, findings of this study suggest that Libyan university teachers need to engage in continuous in-service teacher development programs in order to better practice CLT. These programs should be practical rather than theory based. Observation from well-trained colleagues will help in considering the advantages and drawbacks a teacher might face during teaching. It has also been suggested that teachers should work on creating a native-like environment to motivate students' participation.

Third, based on findings of this study, it has been suggested that part of the teacher training should contain ways of creating teaching resources from simple materials. This should be considered when the university could not provide hi-tech teaching aids in the classrooms.

Finally, teachers and students should do their best in a successful application of CLT but in return, there are certain educational system policies that should be improved. There are certain recommendations in order to help practice CLT properly:

1) New students at the English departments should take placement tests. Low levels should be placed in special language training programs in order to increase their English level before starting the actual courses.
2) Different types of assessment should be introduced to teachers and approved by policy makers. Assessing students should not only be through mid-terms and finals but also through informal assessment like portfolios for example or through class projects and presentations.
3) Smaller class sizes are encouraged. If that is not possible, teachers should implement certain strategies to encourage group work and cooperative based activities. Teachers need also to manage large groups properly.

In conclusion, CLT in Libya is starting to largely take place especially with teachers who have been studying or working abroad. English language teachers have been aware of the importance of applying CLT and are doing their best to develop their

teaching skills in order to achieve high quality teaching which in return will benefit students to be proficient users of the English language.

## About the Author

Ahmed Athawadi is a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at Sabratha University. He specializes in TESOL and teacher education. He holds an MA in TESOL from Oklahoma City University.

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