



REPÚBLICA DEL ECUADOR

UNIVERSIDAD ESTATAL DE MILAGRO

VICERRECTORADO DE INVESTIGACIÓN Y POSGRADO

FACULTAD DE POSGRADO

INFORMES DE INVESTIGACIÓN

PREVIO A LA OBTENCIÓN DEL TÍTULO DE:

**MAGÍSTER EN ENSEÑANZA DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA
EXTRANJERA**

TEMA:

**THE CHALLENGES OF USING THE CLT APPROACH IN THE ECUADORIAN
CLASSROOM: TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVES**

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Milagro, 2025

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DEDICATORIA

The present paper is dedicated to my parents who not only did support me during the time when the research was done but also since the beginning of my professional development path. Additionally, I express my gratitude to my girlfriend Gisella Esthela Bustos Carpio whose unconditional love and intelligence have been a source of inspiration for my professional and personal growth.

AGRADECIMIENTOS

I thank my tutor Mgst. Carla Isabell Lozano Alvarado for giving me all her support during the writing process of the present paper. Likewise, I would like to acknowledge all Unemi's teachers in the Master's program whose commitment to teaching played a pivotal role in my professional development.

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo identificar los problemas que enfrentan los docentes en el aula durante la implementación del enfoque de Enseñanza Comunicativa de Lenguas (CLT, por sus siglas en inglés). Aunque el currículo de inglés en Ecuador se basa completamente en este enfoque, existe una brecha en estudios cualitativos que analicen los desafíos de su aplicación desde la perspectiva del docente, considerando que una gran parte de las investigaciones se ha centrado principalmente en el rendimiento de los estudiantes. Para poder llevar a cabo la presente investigación se estableció la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cuáles son los principales desafíos que enfrentan los docentes ecuatorianos al implementar el enfoque de Enseñanza del Lenguaje Comunicativo (CLT) en sus aulas? Se llevó a cabo una investigación cualitativa con la participación de 10 profesores de inglés, utilizando entrevistas semiestructuradas como instrumento de recolección de datos. La información obtenida fue categorizada y analizada mediante un proceso de codificación y tematización. Los resultados indicaron que los principales factores que dificultan el desarrollo del enfoque CLT están relacionados tanto con el docente como con el estudiante, así como con aspectos culturales y metodológicos. No obstante, los hallazgos sugieren que el problema principal radica en el contexto en el que se implementa este enfoque, es decir, en contextos de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), lo que confirma las afirmaciones de teóricos y practicantes del CLT respecto a la naturaleza comunicativa del enfoque y su desconexión con entornos distintos a aquel en el que surgió originalmente.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza Comunicativa de Lenguas, percepciones docentes, desafíos, CLT.

Abstract

The present paper aims to identify the problems that instructors face in the classroom during the implementation of the Communicative Language teaching (CLT) approach. Although Ecuador's English curriculum is entirely based on CLT, there is a gap in qualitative research studies in terms of analyzing the challenges of using CLT from the teacher's point of view, considering that a vast number of papers have focused mainly on students' performance. In order to conduct the research, the following question was established: what are the main challenges that Ecuadorian teachers face when implementing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in their classrooms. A qualitative research was conducted with 10 English teachers as participants using semi-structured interviews as a data collection instrument. The data that emerged from the interviews was categorized and analyzed using a code and theme process. The results indicated that the main factors that hindered CLT development were related to teacher and student, as well as cultural and methodological issues. However, the findings suggested that the major problem lies in the setting where the approach is implemented, EFL, confirming the statements made by CLT theorists and practitioners about the communicative nature of the approach and its disconnection with settings that are different from the one in which it originally emerged.

Key words: *Communicative Language teaching, teachers' perceptions, challenges, CLT.*

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Introduction

Background

The Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) has received acceptance around the world due to its successful method to learn the target language through communication (Littlewood, 1981). This approach, which is learner-centered, integrates authentic tasks in which the students employ the target language in different settings and contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As a result of its efficacy, different countries have integrated CLT in their national curricula, including Ecuador in an attempt to address the language needs that are required in a globalized world (Ministry of Education of Ecuador, 2016). According to Vanegas, Betancourt, and Recalde (2024), Ecuador has moved from traditional methods which make emphasis on vocabulary memorization, grammar rules, and translation to a communicative approach where the language systems are developed through conversational activities.

Although CLT is part of the curriculum, Ecuadorian teachers have mentioned having difficulties during its integration in the language classes (Calle et al., 2012). Torres and Conza (2023) agree that in Ecuador, the students are not motivated enough to take part in the learning process whenever an activity which involves interaction is being carried out. In the same way, Yucailla (2020) considers that the teachers find it difficult to incorporate the development of receptive skills during CLT lessons due to the communicative driven nature of the approach. Moreover, Sevy-Biloon et al. (2020) establish that Ecuadorian teachers lack the required knowledge to implement a communicative task in the classroom as a result of the scarcity of professional development opportunities for them to familiarize with CLT methodology. Likewise, the authors also affirm that the institution facilities as well as the material impede the proper application of CLT.

Problem Statement

Research studies in the past focused extensively on the efficiency of CLT on EFL and ESL settings; however, authors have not notably concentrated on the challenges of using the approach from the teacher's perspective or provided evidence-based recommendations for improving CLT implementation in the Ecuadorian context (Torres & Conza 2023; Yucailla, 2020). In the great majority of research studies, the focus point is the outcome of the learners after being treated with CLT classes, stressing on the importance and impact of CLT in the on the performance of the students instead of focusing on the opinions of the teacher or the

potential issues that they need to address in the classroom (Alvarez, Tamayo & Dos Santos, 2024). Al-Mekhlafi and Ramani (2011) support this idea by affirming that “Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs are very often largely ignored before a new approach and course materials based on the new approach are introduced.” (p.110). In like manner, Savignon and Wang (2003) affirm that “while many studies report on teachers’ perceptions in implementing communicative language teaching, few have looked at learner attitudes and perceptions with respect to classroom practice.” (p 223). It also implies that there is a lack of qualitative studies or aimed at teachers so as to evaluate their needs when applying CLT. Sotlikova and Sugirin (2016) affirm that some qualitative studies exist; however, there is still a need to provide more data in terms of teachers’ perspective and challenges while using communicative approaches. Thus, the present research aims to gather and analyze information towards the use of CLT in the classroom considering the points of view of the teachers so as to interpret the potential challenges of applying this approach in an Ecuadorian EFL setting.

As a consequence of this gap in research, Ecuadorian teachers do not possess an important source of information on how to include CLT in EFL lessons, considering the limitations of the environment where these are conducted (Calle et al., 2011). In spite of the theoretical advantages, the efficacy of the approach lies in the ability of teachers to solve problems that might appear in a real teaching situation. If teachers do not have a clear understanding of these issues, they may find it difficult to fully adopt CLT, restricting the complete communicative development of their students (Chang & Goswami, 2011). Therefore, the objective of this research is not only to cover a gap but also to provide insights on how to overcome potential problems in the classroom when using CLT. Moreover, by increasing awareness of the obstacles, teachers will have high levels of confidence and motivation to integrate CLT in their lessons, improving the quality of language education.

Justification

This study seeks to narrow the gap between what the scholars have mentioned about CLT and practice by exposing the practical issues that arise during a CLT lesson and provide recommendations based on the teachers’ perceptions. According to Calle et al. (2012), Ecuadorian English teachers lack the necessary knowledge to implement CLT in the classroom, resulting in the constant usage of traditional teaching practices, which primarily emphasize grammar instruction, vocabulary memorization, and written exercises, which often

neglect the development of essential speaking and listening skills (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). According to Sevy-Biloon, et al. (2020), a possible reason for this problem is the necessity of pedagogical training in terms of the methodology which is established in the national curriculum. The authors mention that the English instruction would be more efficient if teachers were enlightened with sufficient information and adequate preparation. Thus, a deeper understanding of the problems that the teachers may face can open the doors to more adequate teaching programs and improved teaching practices.

Considering the information that was aforementioned, the present study seeks to analyze and identify the challenges that teachers encounter in Ecuadorian classrooms when implementing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach by conducting interviews and a survey to instructors from different professional and cultural backgrounds at a primary and secondary levels. In order to guide this study, the following research question has been formulated: what are the main challenges that Ecuadorian teachers face when implementing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in their classrooms?

Based on the information obtained through the different research tools, an in-depth analysis will be carried out about the theoretical framework of CLT. Moreover, the academic data proposed by scholars in relation to the challenges of CLT will be examined thoroughly as the study aims to find connections between the opinions and firsthand experiences of Ecuadorian instructors and the existing theoretical frameworks, making emphasis on the agreements and disagreements. Additionally, the study will warrant attention to the potential obstacles that Ecuadorian Educators may encounter in CLT lessons. To address these challenges, solutions and recommendations will be proposed to navigate the teachers concerns in terms of the usability of the approach in a real teaching context. By carrying out the present research, valuable theoretical and practical information on CLT will be shared in order to add more information in the continuous discussion of the implementation of this approach in the Ecuadorian English Language Classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Communicative competence

In order to have a better understanding of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), it's necessary to gain an insight on the paradigms on which it is based. Communicative

competence is the ability to use the different linguistic systems (Grammar and Vocabulary) in a variety of social contexts (Canale and Swain, 1980). In other words, it refers to the knowledge of the language and how to use it in real communication. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed the most popular division of Communicative Competence. They established that in order to be communicative competent the learners need to be: grammatical competent, sociolinguistic competent, discourse competent, and strategic competent. In terms of grammatical competence, the learner needs to be accurate involving the concepts of syntax, morphology, and phonology. On the other hand, sociolinguistic competence implies the ability to use the language in different social contexts with the appropriate register, considering setting, age, and the topic. Discourse competence is the arrangement of words and sentences coherently in order to convey a message effectively. It is important to remark the difference between grammatical competence and discourse competence as being grammatical competence only involves using the system correctly but only to a sentence level whereas discourse competence is the connection between all of those sentences. Finally, strategic competence, as its name suggests, is the ability to use strategies in order to overcome miscommunication such as paraphrasing, asking for clarification, or code switching.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) also propose the following characteristics of communicative competence:

1. Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
2. Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication)
3. Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)
4. Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies)

Definition of communicative language teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a language approach in ESL and EFL instruction that uses interactive tasks and communicative activities in order to develop the communicative competence of the students. It emerged in the late 60's in order to move from

the traditional teaching methods of the era such as the GMT (Grammar-translation method), ALM (Audio-Lingual method) and STL (Situational Language Teaching) under the conception that language learning was more than the acquisition of lexis items and grammar rules. The basis of CLT lies in the theory proposed by Wilkins (1972) who established that learners had to be taught what was necessary to know in order to communicate in real settings. As a result of this belief, David Wilkins divided the communicative use of the language into notions (location, frequency, size, time, etc) and functions (request, suggestions, apologizing, agreeing, etc). CLT embraced this concept, taking meaning and communication as the core of language learning. Hence, based on the theories of communicative competences of Canale and Swain (1980), the objective of CLT is to enable learners to use the language fluently in different social contexts by the implementation of interactive activities such as role-plays, discussions, information-gap activities where learners develop language systems (Grammar, vocabulary, register, pronunciation) implicitly by using the target language for its real purpose, communication.

According to Harmer (2007), linguistics not only focused on what to teach but also on how to teach it. The author explains that in order to develop language skills and systems in a CLT lesson, it is necessary to expose the learners to real language with the inclusion of authentic materials and give them various opportunities to use it in a real setting in which accuracy is not explicitly assessed. In his book, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Harmer (2007) explains that there are more activities apart from simulations and role-plays which are equally communicative such as information gaps where learners need to share information in order to complete a task. Therefore, the focus point in these activities is that the students have a desire to communicate something in order to achieve a goal. In these activities, the learners need to make use of vocabulary and language structures whose functions are appropriate for the task, without paying attention to their forms. Since these activities aim to simulate real world scenarios, it is not necessary the intervention of the teacher during the learning experience as this is a student-centred approach (Willis, 1996).

Howatt (1984) proposed two versions of CLT, strong and weak. The author mentions that the weaker version in a certain way has become the most popular as it focuses on giving learners the opportunities to use the language; in other words, learn the target language through a language teaching program. On the other hand, the strong version states that the students learn English through natural communication in a real context (for example:

travelling abroad); thus, they concentrate on using the language to learn it rather than learning it in order to use it.

Characteristics of CLT

Different authors have proposed their point of view towards the prominent features of CLT (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 1991; Richards and Rodgers, 2001) in spite of the fact that it is an approach that covers different aspects of language learning and teaching. Considering all the essential data shared by scholars, it can be said that the following are the most remarkable characteristics of CLT:

1. CLT is a language-centered approach which means that the autonomous learner is in charge of his/her own progress by learning new language structures and vocabulary through interacting activities that have been tailored according to his/her needs, proficiency, and interests.
2. In CLT, instruction concentrates on the function of the language rather than on its form. Thus, instead of focusing strictly on grammar (form), learners would take part in activities like making requests or ordering where learners need to make use of items of language whose functions match the purpose of the task.
3. CLT develops fluency rather than accuracy, making learners speak freely without the classic concern of failing. Although accuracy is not completely ignored as it can be examined through teacher's feedback, learners' performance is evaluated based on their ability to handle meaningful conversations.
4. In this approach, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator and a guide instead of being the only source of knowledge in the classroom. The instructor has to set conditions and guarantee that communication can occur among learners by the creation of speaking opportunities and scaffolding the learning process rather than controlling it.

The role of the teacher in CLT

As it was previously mentioned, CLT is a student-centered approach where the learning process revolves around the student (Willis, 1996; Brown, 2007; Richard & Rodgers, 2001; Harmer, 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Littlewood, 1981); thus, the teacher works as a guide and a facilitator. According to Littlewood (1981), during a CLT lesson, the instructor can share knowledge and experience but it has no control over the learners. The author mentions that regardless of the nature of the class, the student will, in

most of the cases, make decisions based on their own experiences and beliefs. In the EFL learning process that takes place in a natural setting, it can be seen that as long as it is provided with the right prompt and stimuli, it is not necessary to count on a teacher, provided that the important factor is the mandatory usage of the target language for a communicative purpose. This is a scenario where the “strong version” of CLT takes place; nevertheless, as it was aforementioned, the weak version of the approach is widely known as the most used in EFL settings; thus, it implies that the language classroom is not a natural environment where teachers' role is fundamental.

Breen and Cadlin (1980) propose the idea that the teacher in CLT lessons needs to generate opportunities for communication among all the participants in the classroom and facilitate the connection between the activities in the text and the students. This aligns with the information provided by Littlewood (1981), Brown (2007), and Richards and Rodgers (2001) who claim that the instructor has to coordinate activities with the appropriate level of difficulty, and find cohesion and coherence among them in order to boost and develop the communicative skills of the students. Likewise, they mention that it is imperative that the instructor monitors and supervises the correct language use of learners in terms of grammar and vocabulary in a communicative manner without interfering during the language production stage; for example, making notes of students' slips and errors during language production activities to later provide feedback and correction through a communicative peer practice. Additionally, it is required that the teacher grants the students with different and varied forms of language and register so they can be able to use the correct form in the appropriate setting (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In addition, the instructor sometimes needs to take an active role within the communication process by interacting directly with the learners in order to build rapport and generate confidence in language production (Breen & Cadlin, 1980). Moreover, in the words of Richards (2006), the teacher has the task of identifying the language needs of the learners through a series of formative activities as well as measuring their motivation levels towards English learning. It is important to stress this latter because as Littlewood (1981) states, language development only takes place when learners are willing to express their ideas without any inhibitions; hence, it is advisable that the teacher promotes class participation by not focusing explicitly on mistakes which may prevent students from using the language freely.

The role of the student in CLT

Different authors have come up with different roles for the students in CLT (Richards, 2006; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011); however, they agreed on the fact that learners act as negotiators of meaning. Thus, considering that interaction plays a paramount role in CLT, regardless of the limitation of their language proficiency, they need to try to make themselves understood with their environment in order to guarantee the effectiveness of the approach. According to Krashen's affective hypothesis (1982), one of the reasons behind the lack of oral production in the classroom is the fear of making mistakes. In order to overcome this issue, CLT teachers do not provide feedback explicitly and immediately on the form of the language but use communicative criteria so as to check the success of the students' performance, without interrupting the learning experience and discouraging the student from participating. For that reason, CLT provides the tools for students to commit themselves to interacting. Littlewood (1981) represents this through a particular example: if a learner says *Where you went last night?* the given feedback will be *I went to the cinema*, demonstrating that the message was completely understood; therefore, this shows that the feedback is functional rather than structural. As a result of this procedure, there is no interference in the flow of communication, enabling the student to continue without any concern.

Richards (2006) mentions that learners in CLT need to develop a sense of autonomy, meaning that they are responsible for their own progress. This is directly connected with the previous factor, considering that without learners' interaction within their group, CLT will represent a challenge rather than a method of language learning. Due to the fact that learners have a preconceived idea of what language learning is as a result of the extensive usage of traditional methods, whenever they are exposed to methods where they are in charge of their own learning, they feel confused and withdrawn (Henner-Stanchina & Riley, 1978); therefore, approaches that involve cooperative learning may seem unfamiliar to learners who are used to rely extensively on books and the English teacher as the unique source of knowledge in the classroom. For that reason, it is suggested that learners understand that miscommunication is the result of the lack of cooperation from the listener and speaker, in other words, it is a shared responsibility, and not one of the parts faults (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

CLT in the language classroom

Since the 90's, CLT has gained popularity and reached parts of the world where ELT had been taught traditionally (Brown, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Dewey (2007), in the 90's globalization changed the world we lived and the way we communicated, making English language pivotal in order to connect with other EFL countries as it has been seen as the lingua franca of the world. This phenomenon influenced the decisions of EFL countries' policy makers by drawing their attention to language approaches that involved interaction since their main objective was to educate a population who were able to communicate effectively in English; hence, communicative instruction moved from ESL settings (countries where English is mainly spoken) to EFL environments. As a result, European and South American countries have adopted CLT methodology in their English language teaching national programs (Banegas, 2008). Consequently, a great deal of information has been published through research studies considering the students' outcomes and perspectives around the world; however, regarding the teachers' point of view, studies seem to be restricted in number (Savignon & Wang, 2003).

In our context, Ecuador, according to Vanegas, Bettencourt, and Recalde (2024), CLT has faced several challenges which are going to be discussed later; however, CLT is still thought to be the most appropriate approach in terms of language learning. This is supported by the information gathered by Urgiles, Vargas, and Magallanes (2024) who conducted a quantitative study with 60 College students as participants came to the conclusion that CLT boosted the fluency and confidence of the participants by lowering their levels of anxiety; nevertheless, the authors mentioned that 5 CLT professional instructors took part in the classes as well as the proficiency level of the participants was B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which might have played a paramount role in the results. Similarly, in a study that took place in a high-school with 95 students found out that in spite of limited material and the usage of the L1 by the teachers, the students manage to convey a message and increase the level of interaction (Abad & Robles, 2016). Likewise, Torres and Conza (2023) proved through a pre and posttest that the exposure to CLT represented a slight improvement in the vocabulary acquisition in a group of children; everthough, the showed difficulties to make connection between the meaning and form. In like manner, Yucailla (2020) provided remarkable results in relation to the approach by evidencing that despite the communicative focus of CLT, it was also effective in the development of receptive skills.

Non- western countries are not unfamiliar to CLT. This data is supported by a research study conducted in Taiwan in order to measure the levels of motivation of students with the usage of CLT showed that they were willing to continue learning English as they realized that they could make progress, use the target language, and it was a useful tool for their future professional careers and to study abroad; in other words, CLT boosted the extrinsic motivation of the participants (Chang, 2014). Likewise, similar results were found in a qualitative study conducted in Iran with EFL teachers as subjects. The teacher mentioned that the participants embraced CLT after seeing positive results in their students regarding oral fluency (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Rousse-Malpat, et al. (2022) confirms these findings by asserting that this approach not only improves learners' receptive and productive skills but also raises awareness of the importance of learning the language communicative, increasing the motivation of the participants in the learning process.

The challenges of CLT

As it was mentioned in the previous section, CLT application in the classroom has encountered different difficulties. Considering that the purpose of the present research is analyzing the challenges of using CLT from the instructors perspective, it has been decided to divide the possible factors that impede the proper implementation of CLT into “instructor-associated factors, student-associated factors, methodological factors, and Setting/Cultural factors” in order to facilitate the understanding of the constraints of CLT and the discussion of the results of the present study.

Instructor-associated factors

According to Brown (2001), teachers who are not native speakers of the language might have difficulty in conducting a CLT lesson. Indeed, this is confirmed by Richards (2015) who claimed that “language proficiency does affect how well a teacher can teach a second language” (p. 113). Therefore, one of the most mentioned issues during CLT lessons is the low proficiency levels of the teachers in comparison to a native one. This thought is supported by several studies in EFL settings (Chang & Goswami, 2014). For instance, in a research study conducted in China by Fang and Garland (2014) found that teachers with low English level struggled when conducting CLT classes; there was poor classroom management and lack of fluent interaction with the students.

The lack of proficiency is not only a problem of Asian countries; indeed, it has been a local issue in the last decades. In the study conducted in Ecuador, Calle et al. (2012) analyzed a sample of 215 teachers and found out that just a small percentage included CLT in their classes; in spite of the fact that the books they worked with were designed for it. The authors mentioned that only 41,7 % of the participants were able to speak fluently and that translation was used frequently in the classroom. This information is corroborated by Vanegas, Bettencourt, and Recalde (2024) who affirmed that in Ecuador, a number of teachers lack the necessary knowledge to impart English and there is a scarcity of qualified teachers in public institutions, difficulting the inclusion of The ELT methodologies that are suggested in the curriculum. The poor L2 performance is represented in the results of the hiring process called “Quiero ser maestro” in which an English test, where the required score is B2, is involved. As a result of this process, from the 2336 teachers who took part in the program, only 117 teachers could pass the test, evidencing a current issue in our country (Cajas, Cherrez, & Chicaiza, 2023). However, Orosz, Monzón, and Velazco (2021) mention that since the teachers have been evaluated by the government, they have received training sessions constantly.

Another factor that hinders the employment of CLT in EFL settings is the lack of training in communicative approaches. This idea is supported by Richards and Rodgers (2001) who claim that “nonnative teachers may feel less than comfortable about such procedures without special training.” Cajas, Cherrez, and Chicaiza, (2023) affirm that one of the reasons that contribute to the low level of students is the usage of outdated and methodologies which are teacher centered. In the same way, Orosz, Monzón, and Velazco (2021) state that although CLT is included in the curriculum, it is not applied correctly due to the lack of knowledge on how communicative tasks work. Chang and Goswami (2014) reinforced this idea through a study in which the group of teachers without sufficient training showed that due to their inexperience, the students’ learning experience was affected as the teachers could not handle group activities and failed to provide tasks with the right level of complexity for the students. It was observed that the class was teacher-centered, missing the teacher’s guidance during tasks.

Likewise, in a study conducted by Phothongsunan (2020), it was mentioned that some teachers find it difficult to get used to using student-centered approaches as they were initially and primarily trained to use Grammar-translation methods. The teachers mentioned that playing the role of an observer rather than someone who is actively participating in the

classroom was completely new for them. In China, which is another non-western country, Fang, Khan, and Ganapathy (2023) states that from 550 000 teachers, only 55% of them are qualified which, according to the author, is the major constraint in the inefficiency of CLT in the country. In the same vein, students around the globe have exemplified the aforementioned issued and established that unless EFL instructors receive proper CLT training, the students will continue struggle to communicate effectively

In Ecuador, English teachers prefer continuing using traditional approaches over CLT, focusing more on the grammar system than in communication (Calle et al.,2012). In a study conducted by Orosz, Monzón, and Velzaco (2021) in which all the participants had a B2 level of proficiency (the one that is required by the ministry of education), it was found that teachers use the approaches that they are familiar with rather than the new methodologies proposed in the curriculum; however, they mentioned that they are willing to receive training sessions if policy makers make them available. Similarly, the participants mentioned that the language input is not enough, considering that Ecuador is an EFL country.

Student-associated factors

According to Littlewood (1981) CLT only can take place if the learner is motivated enough to interact with his classmates. Similarly, as it was mentioned in one of the sections, the learner is a negotiator of meaning which implies that they obligatorily need to convey a message; thus, the student himself becomes an input for the other participants (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Therefore, the failure to comply with these roles means that the approach cannot occur effectively in the classroom. This is demonstrated in one of the studies conducted by Shakin, Khan, and Ahmed (2024) who found that the low levels of participation and motivation of the students resulted in the frustration of the teacher towards the usage of CLT. The author expresses that the learners were accustomed to traditional teaching methods in which the teacher is the center of the learning process and they were merely spectators with almost no participation. It was also discussed in the same research study that the resistance of participating was the major challenge of CLT.

Chang and Goswami (2011) also mentioned that the previous experiences with traditional approaches modified their performance towards CLT, considering that they had a passive role during the whole learning experience. Likewise, in a study that was held by Lin (2019) in Taiwan, it was shown that students were not comfortable with the class as they found implicit language teaching too complex and tiring. In Ecuador, a study conducted by

Chango et al. (2023) could not achieve the expected result towards CLT due to the lack of commitment of the student to interaction as they started to use their L1.

Another student-related factor is the low level of proficiency. Chang and Goswami (2014) said that the lack of language proficiency by the students made it difficult to achieve the objective of the lesson. The authors stated that CLT was only effective with students with a high proficiency level whereas the ones with language gaps have difficulty in integrating the vocabulary of the target language. Seraj et al. (2021) also mention that the English level hindered the participation of the students as they had never been exposed to an approach that involved constant interaction with their classmates.

Our context is not unfamiliar with this problem. For instance, Chango et al. (2023) mentioned that without a clear instruction, when the learners are exposed to English and they do not have an appropriate language level for the class, not only will they feel demotivated but also lost. As it was previously mentioned, CTL in Ecuador is facing challenges. Considering that the researchers say that the level of English of the participants play an essential role on CLT efficacy, it does not come as a surprise to know that Ecuador is one of the countries with lowest English level in the region according to a ranking shared by EF (EF, 2024)

Methodological factors

Different authors have mentioned that CLT is a complex approach that cannot be labeled and categorized easily (Harmer, 2007; Brown; 2001); Thus, one of the constraints of CLT that has been mentioned in research studies is the difficulty in applying the approach itself. In studies conducted by Chang and Goswami (2011) and Chang (2004) it was found that the number of students in the classroom made the teaching process difficult to conduct as they were missing time to provide feedback, assess, and finish the activities themselves; thus, the teacher could not play the role of a facilitator as CLT theory establishes; meaning that in spite of the fact that the theory mentioned that it is an effective approach, its efficiency in numerous settings is questionable.

Furthermore, Lin (2019) mentioned that little information has been given on how the approach works. In spite of the fact that Richards and Rodgers (2001) provide a list of procedures to follow in a CLT lesson and Littlewood (1981) explained the psychological factors to take into account, the reality is that in the scenarios where the challenge appears is

EFL settings, meaning that little importance has been given to state the differences of teaching in EFL and ESL settings using CLT, taking into account that CLT emerged in a ESL setting. Lin (2019) also states that teachers frequently struggle during summative assessment considering that in EFL countries there is tendency to evaluate students based on their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

Similarly, Ahmad and Rao (2013) who conducted a research study, found that CLT was a challenge to conduct considering that during the evaluation process there were no ready-made tests; thus, they had to create their own test apart from the activities that they designed daily. The participants of the study found this process stressful in comparison to more traditional methodologies. CLT was also seen as a time-consuming process for some teachers. For instance, Orosz, Monzón, and Velazco (2021) stated that CLT lessons required a great deal of preparation, let alone the time that is needed in class. The participants in the studies of the previous authors, mentioned that the time spent in finding that right activity for their students and thinking of how to implement discourage the teachers from using CLT considering that it was too demanding. This is supported by theoretical frameworks which indicate that the materials in CLT are numerous and they do not follow any structure as in traditional approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The authors also mention that EFL teachers may find this process complex to conduct by nonnative teachers with limited practice in communicative approaches.

It appears that time constraints and the communicative nature of the approach hinders teachers to correctly apply the approach in the classroom. There are factors that have a close connection with what is going to be discussed in the following segment.

Setting/Cultural Factors

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), Harmer (2007), and Brown (2001) CLT emerged in Europe in the late 60's and was coined and developed by British academics; in other words, CLT appeared in an ESL setting. Several authors have mentioned that due to this fact, the reasons for the possible challenges for the implementation of CLT is the place where it is conducted, the setting; this, CLT might not match the educational contexts of EFL countries entirely. Li (1998) mentions that in China, society studies languages for taking standardized tests and receiving qualifications; therefore, students are not eager to learn the language communicatively avoiding grammatical rules and explicit vocabulary instruction as

the great majority of these tests are based on these systems, which results in a lack of interest in CLT classes.

In another study conducted in the same country, Han (2022) mentions that due to cultural differences with western countries, CLT cannot take place effectively in China as the students in this country are more passive and society is highly teacher centered. It means that learners are used to traditional methods not because of the shortage of academic knowledge by the instructor but because of society norms.

Zhang, Li, and Wang (2013) state that Chinese society has different ideas of what a teacher should do in the classroom. Usually they are seen as a source of knowledge and as an authority that should be respected, a belief that cannot be modified as a respect for their culture. In CLT, the teacher is seen as a passive guide who does not interrupt the teaching process, while in China it must answer questions and correct mistakes.

Ellis (1996) has already talked about this issue by asserting that CLT needs to accept different cultures and be open to different parts of the world, implying its development in EFL settings. Han (2022) mentions that in other cultures apart from China, students are seen as individuals who need to be filled with knowledge and the teacher is responsible for it. This belief is completely the opposite of what is expected in CLT, considering that in this approach the students are seen as autonomous individuals. Indeed, Littlewood (1981) states that in CLT, students can work even without a teacher once they have been given the right stimuli. Therefore, in EFL settings, the lack of individuality and the reliance on the teacher make the progress of CLT difficult to achieve.

Bax (2003) criticises the usage of CTL in EFL settings by mentioning that policy makers do not take into account the culture where the approach is applied. The author establishes that the differences between EFL and ESL are considerably remarkable to the point that EFL countries need to reconsider if a communicative approach is the most appropriate for English learning in the future. Factors such as the learning purpose, language input, learning environment and teacher's proficiency are one of the major differences between the two contexts and curiously, the factors for the challenges for CLT that are presented in the present paper. Those differences make an impact on the performance of the students. This is supported by the study conducted by Calle et al. (2012) in our country which mentions that for English learners in Ecuador, the only place to use the target language is the classroom. On the other hand, in an ESL country the students have more opportunities to

practice, considering that English can be used elsewhere in a communicative context which is the main goal of CLT (Oxford, 2001). The views of Bax are aligned with Tan (2005) who mentioned that CLT effectiveness lies in the context where it is applied. The author explained that in Singapore, students tend to listen to the teacher in silence for later having their performance assessed by the teacher.

In spite of the fact that CLT in EFL settings promotes extrinsic motivation (Chang, 2014), Mohammed (2023) mentions that there are few opportunities to develop its counterpart in EFL settings (intrinsic motivation). As it was aforementioned, in the ESL context the students have more chances to practice what they learned in school and are motivated enough because English has an essential role in their life while in EFL settings the only motivation that triggers language learning are high-scores, qualifications, or better opportunities for their future careers (Chang, 2014). Consequently, the level of motivation represents a problem for proper application of CLT considering that it has a fundamental role in the classroom (Littlewood, 1981).

Methodology

Participants

The participants for the present study were 10 English teachers who are currently working in a private institution in a rural area in Machala, a city in the coastal region of Ecuador. From the total number of teachers, five work in the secondary level and 5 in the primary level. All the teachers involved in the study have more than 3 years of experience in language teaching. The criteria for selecting the participants were that the teachers were currently in service, appropriate language proficiency, and teaching English as a foreign language or teaching an academic subject in English.

Instrument for Data Collection

The present research uses a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews which were conducted face-to-face and online via Zoom, lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. The purpose of this instrument is to collect data about the perspectives of the teachers towards the problems that emerge during the application of a CLT lesson. Similarly, this tool was chosen to collect information directly from the source as the participants are able to share their experiences. In addition, the interviews were carried out entirely in English and were recorded and transcribed considering the participants consent. In like manner, the

participants' names are not revealed as well as the name of the institution they are working in.

Validity and Reliability Process

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the interview, a semi-structured design was applied so as to maintain the coherence and consistency during the participants interventions, enabling an in-depth discussion on their experiences using the approach. To guarantee reliability, a pilot interview was previously tested on a small group of participants as a measure to avoid biased answers by modifying and restructuring questions. This procedure facilitated the process of how the questions were interpreted. On the other hand, validity was strengthened through the selection of questions that were based on the main ideas of CLT such as communicative competence and learner centeredness to allow responses that reflect the teachers perspectives about the application of CLT in the classroom and the potential challenges that emerge during its implementation. Similarly, follow-up questions and probing techniques were also incorporated to gather full and detailed responses. As it was aforementioned, the researcher was aware of biased responses and the answers were reviewed and checked by the participants in order to guarantee their accuracy. Likewise, after the discussion of the results of the present research, a process of member checking was applied by sharing the results with the teachers who took part in the process as a form of respondent validation.

Methods for Data Analysis

As it was previously stated, the preset research has a qualitative design which indicates that the data is represented through descriptions. It is a phenomenological research which seeks to describe and investigate the experiences of individuals in a specific setting or scenario. In order to analyze the perceptions of the participants, a thematic analysis was conducted. The reason behind the decision for the selection of this method was its flexibility when it comes to recognizing, analyzing and showing patterns which permit the researcher to draw conclusions on the possible issues that hinder CLT from being effective.

The first step was to transcript the interviews to maintain the detailed responses of the participants. In order to find the connection between the participants' interventions, a thorough reading of the transcripts was done with the respective coding process of the

information that is relevant for the research questions that was formulated. In order to allow the themes to emerge from the information provided by the teachers, a bottom-up coding approach was used; on the other, a top-down coding approach was also employed considering the proposed features of CLT by the theorists. After the codes had been identified, these were classified into themes that showed similar content that referred to the problems of CLT related to the teacher, the students or the approach itself. Later, the themes were appropriately labeled in order to ensure distinctiveness to avoid confusion. Similarly, quotes were taken directly from the interviews in order to support and explain each theme.

Instrument for Data Analysis

The analysis of the data that was collected was conducted by using the software ATLAS.ti which is mainly used for qualitative data and textual examination. This tool permits the researcher to generate codes from large interview transcripts and analyze them qualitatively. According to Saldaña (2016), a code is a word or a phrase that captures the idea of a group of an argument that is relevant to the research question. After the transcription was uploaded, it was read thoroughly and the most important segments that were important for the purpose of the present paper were labeled.

The coding process is followed by the report of the results with the same software as it provides different ways to represent the connections between the provided data. For instance, the code family option was used with a group of codes organized under a general term which eased the process of following hierarchical structures and to identify the different challenges of CLT. Likewise, another tool provided by ATLAS.ti is the network tool that was essential to show the connection among the codes, categories, themes in order to provide a clear vision of the results.

Results

In this section the themes and the codes that emerged from the interviews are presented through a table followed by its corresponding description. The table is divided into the factors that hinder the appropriate application of CLT: Teacher, student, cultural, and methodological factors.

Table 1*Codes and Themes on Students Factors*

Codes	Theme
Lack of CLT knowledge	Teacher Components
Reliance on traditional methods	
Inadequate English level	
Lack of motivation	
Lack of willingness to using CLT	
Lack of autonomy	Student Component
Reluctance to speak	
Low English proficiency	
Dependence of L1	
Misbehaviour	
Teacher-centered expectations	Cultural Components
Inappropriate setting	
Exam-oriented mindset	
Passive learning habits	
Time Constraints	Methodological Components
High preparation demands	
Insufficient information for EFL instruction	
Large Classrooms	

Four main categories emerged from the analysis: teacher, students, cultural, and methodological components. Teacher related issues that were mentioned by the participants were lack of motivation, reliance on traditional methods, inadequate English level for language instruction, and lack of motivation and willingness to CLT. Alternatively, it was found that there were factors related to the students' performance in the classroom that negatively affects CLT application such as Lack of autonomy, reluctance to speak, low English proficiency, dependence of L1 and misbehavior. On the other hand, apart from the aforementioned factors, the interviewees mentioned that the culture of the country where they work impedes correct CLT application as they could share that there are Teacher-centered expectations, exam-oriented mindset and Passive learning habits. However, another theme that appeared during the analysis was the methodological components which are an obstacle

in the classroom such as time constraints, high preparation demands, insufficient information for EFL instruction, and large classrooms.

Discussion

In the table that was shown in the previous section it was found that one of the factors related to the challenges of CLT is directly related to the person in charge of the instruction, the teacher. During the interviews the participants mentioned that they do not have enough academic background knowledge in terms of CLT as it was revealed in one of the extracts of the interview:

I think that we teachers deserve more training sessions of CLT from the government or any other entity because in the book there is any explanation about how to teach using those activities and I personally believe that I need to have strong basis before using something that I'm asked to do (Interview, April 18th, 2025)

This finding is supported by Richards and Rodgers (2001) who establish that the lack of experience and knowledge in complex teaching procedures as CLT may be a burden in the proper for its application. In our context, Orosz, Monzón, and Velzaco (2021) equally mention that the participants in their study are open to professional development opportunities due to their insufficient knowledge on the real application of the approach. This issue leads to another problem that was identified which is the overreliance on traditional approaches as it was mentioned in one of the interviews.

“I'm influenced by the way that I was taught in school and I continue using it with my students. I stick to what I know and what it's effective to my students” (Interview, April 18th, 2025)

This outcome is supported by Vanegas, Bettencourt, and Recalde (2024) who mention that in Ecuador teachers have a tendency to keep returning to traditional approaches such as Grammar translation method and strategic approach. In like manner, Orosz, Monzón, and Velzaco (2021), that despite having an appropriate English level (B2), the instructors opted for using approaches they were acquainted with instead of striking to the methodologies established by the ministry of education. Likewise, Phothongsunan (2020) found that in spite of having CLT theory knowledge, the teacher practices were still based on traditional practices.

Another factor that emerged from the analysis was the insufficient language proficiency of the teacher when conducting a CLT lesson. It can be demonstrated in one of the extracts taken from the interview transcription as follow: “I was in charge of CAE preparation and I could notice that it’s important that the teacher level needs to be above the current level of the students if you want to see improvement” (Interview, April 18th, 2015)

This finding is supported by Richards and Rodgers (2015) and Brown (2001) who claim that the effectiveness of an approach depends on the level of language proficiency of the instructor. Indeed, according to Cajas, Cherrez, and Chicaiza (2023), the English level of English teachers in Ecuador is not acceptable according to the Ministry of Education which claims that B2 level is appropriate for language instruction. However, the analysis of the interviews mentions that in spite of the fact the English level of the participants was B2, they still faced difficulties as their students have the same level. Thus, this information agrees with the statements made by Brown (2001) who mentioned that non-native teachers struggle with applying communicative methodologies, implying that effective language instruction only takes place whenever the instructor’s language level is above the students’ level of proficiency.

The instructors also mentioned that the English level of the students represented an important problem for them when implementing a communicative activity as it was commented by one of them: “The main obstacle in the classroom is the level of the students. They lack the grammar and vocabulary knowledge that is essential for the lesson. Usually, this creates problems such as low levels of class participation and motivation” (Interview, April 18th, 2015)

This observation is supported by Chango et al. (2023) who conducted a study in our context and found similar results by stating that students have a sense of failure when they have restricted language competence and get involved in communicative activities. Likewise, Chang and Goswami (2014) obtained similar results through a research study where they came to the conclusion that not having sufficient language knowledge leads to poor performance in CLT settings. These results are not unfamiliar considering that students in Ecuador have one of the lowest levels in the region (EF, 2024). As a result of issue, it does come as a surprise demotivated student in the classroom or unwillingness to be part of group activities where the main goal is interaction, which is another problem that was said by another participant

The language issue is not only something to do with low grades but also with the students' motivation. I've seen students who don't care about their progress or the language process. I consider this as the worst scenario because we cannot make progress unless we have a goal and these students clearly don't have one. (Interview, April 18th, 2015)

What has been discussed previously is supported by the academic publications of Littlewood (1981) who mentions that students' motivation is fundamental in CLT as language progress is built through communication among students and the instructor is not seen as the main source of knowledge, meaning that the development of the learner communicative skills depends on the desire and openness of his/her peers. Likewise, the data found in the interviews is also shared by Lin (2019) who found the reluctance of the teachers to use CLT methods lie on the low interest of the students in being part of the learning process by not engaging in role-plays or interactive activities. On the other hand, the teachers who were interviewed also mentioned that one of the reasons behind the student's reaction was their unfamiliarity with interactive and active procedures in which L2 was extensively with autonomous learning as a requirement. This can be seen in the following statement: "Many students come from different schools where they were mainly listeners and not active participants like copying information from the board or repetition so when they have to speak freely, they feel overwhelmed." (Interview, April 18th, 2015)

Chango et al. (2023) found the same results through a study where it was seen that CLT was not effective as the students were not used to this kind of instruction and as a result, L1 was used for a great part of the lesson with little interaction in L2. In addition, Chang and Goswami (2011) also reach the conclusion that one of the issues of CLT is that students find guided discovery analysis complex and difficult to achieve, making this approach unsuitable for students with traditional learning backgrounds.

The participants of the present study not only shared their thoughts about the students, but also the belief from students' parents regarding language learning by claiming that language instruction equals subject learning. For the purpose of the present study, it was decided to name it a "cultural factor" and it is supported by the comments of the participants:

People expect to see students quiet and silent in language classes with no interaction at all. According to external people, the teacher should be in charge of everything that

is taught in the classroom, limiting the students to be part of the teaching process. Parents are used to traditional learning and they want their children to receive the same education they did which is not the best option. (Interview, April 18th, 2015)

This finding is supported by Zhang, Li, and Wang (2013) who mentions that CLT is not appropriate in certain societies. The authors found out that Chinese culture's tendency of respect and responsibility made the approach to be unsuitable as it was expected from the student not to talk directly to the teacher or be in complete silence during the lesson. Likewise, Han (2022) mentions that one of the most remarkable factors that impede the correct application of CLT is the perception that western and eastern nations have in relation to language learning and the teacher's role. Similarly, Ellis (1996) mentioned that CLT practitioners need to adapt its norms to different cultures. In other words, it is suggested that CLT should be modified when being applied in EFL countries where the environment, the learners, and even the instructors are different. As it was aforementioned, Brown (2001) states that teachers whose mother tongue is not English may have difficulties applying CLT, implying the issues that EFL teachers may encounter. Thus, considering all the demands and pressure from EFL cultural aspects, it can be stated that the approach is not suitable in this setting. This statement was constantly mentioned by the participants in this study:

When I'm teaching English, students may produce language but once they leave the classroom, they stop speaking English. If only they spoke English outside more often, they would make more progress. That's why students who move abroad improve their communicative skills faster so I think that in a place like that we teachers might get better results. (April 18th, 2015)

This result is directly supported by Bax (2003) and Tan (2005) who state that Communicative approaches often do not consider where they are applied. Likewise, Han (2022) agrees with this point of view, as he mentioned that one of the main problems for the teacher is the difficulty to connect CLT principals with the characteristics of the local context. In like manner, Calle et al. (2012) mentioned that in Ecuador students have insufficient chances to practice the L2 considering not only the lack of academic training of the teacher but also the setting where the instruction takes place as it is almost impossible to continue practicing the language outside the classroom. Thus, the results obtained from the interviews imply that regardless of the language level of teachers and students, positive outcomes in terms of language development are hardly achieved in a large classroom in an

EFL setting. Indeed, different participants mentioned that the size of the class as well as the required amount of time for the lesson was rather an issue when implying a communicative lesson. This problem is directly related to the impracticality of using CLT in EFL settings and the complexity to match CLT methodology with the reality of the teachers. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, it was necessary to label it as a methodological problem and it was mentioned during the interviews: “It’s impossible to get all the 32 students to participate within a short time span. In those circumstances, I rather opt for more practical methods which might be considered as traditional but at least all students are part of the lesson” (Interview, April 18th, 2015)

This is directly supported by popular theorists such as Harmer (2007) and Brown (2001) who mention that CLT is a complex approach to implement. Likewise, Chang and Goswami (2011), Chang (2004), and Lin (2022) established through case studies that in CLT lessons, teachers struggle to complete all the lesson stages, especially the ones which involve feedback.

Conclusions

In the present research, it was proposed to find the reasons behind the challenges that Ecuadorian teachers face in the classroom using CLT, an approach which prioritizes communication over language analysis. In order to support the finds a literature review was conducted and a semi-structured interview was applied to Ecuadorian teachers in order to answer the research questions. With the discussion of the results it was demonstrated that although the language classroom, teacher’s and student’s failure to meet CLT standard characteristics were directly related to the issue, it can be concluded that one of the major challenges lies in the setting where CLT is being implemented. It was observed a cultural factor that impeded students and teachers to continue using the approach as the main way of instruction. On the one hand, teacher had a sense of underachievement after acknowledging learners lack of practice outside the classroom due to the little opportunities for language usage and; on the other hand, the participants affirmed that learners were excessively used to learning with traditional methods due to the fact that they did not see English as a tool for communication but as a regular subject. Other factors mentioned such as exam oriented-mindset and passive oriented habits are linked to the aforementioned problem.

As it was previously mentioned, not enough CLT training as well as their low English level were other reasons for teachers not being able to carry out the approach effectively. As a result, these might have led to reducing the possibilities to include CLT in the classroom or lowering teacher's motivation to use communicative activities. On the contrary, it was found that when students do not stick to their roles, interactive skills are not properly developed, especially when students rely on L1. Thus, it can be concluded that students can become communicative and competent; however, it's necessary for the teacher to be aware of the theory behind the approach and know how to provide real opportunities for using the language for a real purpose. In spite of the fact that the approach was not originally designed for EFL settings, the teacher needs to be aware of the characteristics of the approach such as concentrating on exposing the learner to chunks of language that are useful for daily basis activities and do not analyze grammar explicitly. Therefore, by acknowledging their own limitations, the issues will be reduced and learners will progressively develop linguistic skills starting with not fully optimized interaction but using the language to communicate their ideas, which is the main objective of CLT.

Recommendations

Considering the previously mentioned findings, it is necessary to provide suggestions on future research. Firstly, it is imperative to conduct empirical studies on EFL settings not only to cover a gap in research but also to provide academics with more data towards the problems of CLT in this setting. It is essential to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research taking into account students and teacher's perceptions as it was evidenced that there is still reluctance towards the use of CLT in the classroom. Furthermore, it is pivotal to provide more evidence to the usage of CLT with students of different educational levels as well as diverse levels of language proficiency so as to enrich the academic community with a plethora of results regarding communicative approaches application. On the other hand, considering the preferences of learners to use traditional methods, it is suggested to conduct comparative research including communicative language approaches and traditional ones in order to analyze the efficiency of CLT and observe why traditional methods are still popular among learners and teachers.

In the results it was found that teachers feel demotivated with the lack of interaction in the classroom by the students as a result of their low level of English proficiency. Thus,

carrying out empirical studies using CLT in English learning during the early stages of language learning is necessary in order to evaluate the effectiveness of communicative approaches in levels where students lack the necessary language skills to perform characteristics communicative tasks of CLT. Moreover, as it was indicated in the first section of the present paper, Ecuador English Curriculum is based on a communicative approach; thus, in view of the constant challenges and issues said by the teachers, it is important to give due consideration to conducting a study whose main objective is to tackle this problem directly by proposing different strategies to overcome these barriers. This is fundamental taking into account the fact that little information towards the correct application of CLT has been shared with the professionals in the field. Therefore, it is important to implement and design CLT materials and analyze their efficacy in real settings, especially ELF contexts where the approach has been criticized and ignored by instructors.

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