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Communicative Environments in Ecuadorian EFL Classrooms: A teacher-centered literature review of CLT implementation

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Communicative Environments in Ecuadorian EFL Classrooms: A teacher-centered literature review of CLT implementation

Entornos comunicativos en las aulas de inglés como Lengua Extranjera en Ecuador: una revisión bibliográfica centrada en el profesor sobre la implementación del CLT

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Abstract

The development of communicative competence in English is a priority within the Ecuadorian educational system; however, a documented gap persists between the curriculum grounded in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and classroom practices that continue to rely on traditional methods. To examine this discrepancy, an integrative literature review was conducted, analyzing peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 in databases such as Scopus, ERIC, SciELO, and Google Scholar. The collected information was subjected to a thematic analysis focused on classroom interaction, the teacher's role, and the development of communicative competence. The findings reveal that CLT implementation remains limited due to traditional pedagogical beliefs, insufficient methodological training to foster communicative practices, challenges in creating authentic communicative environments, and the predominance of teacher-centered methods that limit student participation and hinder the development of oral fluency. The implications of the study provide key evidence to inform educational policy decisions, strengthen the design of teacher-training programs, and encourage further research on classroom interaction in EFL contexts in the Ecuadorian setting.

Keywords: communicative competence, CLT, EFL teaching, Ecuador, teacher training.

Resumen

El desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa en inglés es una prioridad en el sistema educativo ecuatoriano; sin embargo, persiste una brecha documentada entre el currículo basado en el Enfoque Comunicativo (CLT) y las prácticas docentes que persisten en métodos tradicionales. Para analizar este desajuste, se realizó una revisión integrativa de literatura que analizó estudios arbitrados publicados entre 2020 y 2025 en bases de datos como Scopus, ERIC, SciELO y Google Scholar. La información recopilada fue sometida a un análisis temático enfocado en base a la interacción en el aula, el rol del docente y el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa. Los resultados evidencian que la implementación CLT es limitada debido a creencias pedagógicas tradicionales, insuficiente formación metodológica para promover prácticas comunicativas, dificultades para crear entornos auténticos de interacción, y un predominio de métodos centrados en el docente que restringen la participación estudiantil y afecta la fluidez oral. Las implicaciones del estudio aportan evidencia clave para orientar la toma de decisiones en políticas educativas, fortalecer el diseño de programas de formación docente y promover futuras investigaciones sobre la interacción en aulas de EFL dentro del contexto ecuatoriano.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje del inglés, competencia comunicativa, enfoque comunicativo, Ecuador, práctica docente.

Introduction

The development of communicative competence in English has become a central priority in the Ecuadorian educational system. As international mobility and digital interconnectedness increase, English is no longer perceived simply as a subject to pass, but as a tool that grants students access to academic growth, employment, and intercultural participation. However, the extent to which learners can communicate meaningfully depends largely on how teachers implement pedagogical approaches in real classroom settings, beyond curriculum mandates or theoretical familiarity.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been widely recognized as an approach that prioritizes meaningful interaction, negotiation of meaning, and purposeful communication rather than isolated grammatical accuracy (Richards, 2021; Littlewood, 2022). CLT views language not merely as a system of rules but as a tool for expressing ideas, negotiating meaning, and performing social functions. In this approach, students engage in authentic communicative tasks that promote fluency, autonomy, and confidence. In EFL contexts such as Ecuador, CLT has the potential to transform English instruction from a memorization-based subject into a participatory and functional learning experience; however, its effective implementation depends on teachers' understanding of the approach, their beliefs about language learning, and the availability of resources that support communicative work (Hidalgo, 2023).

A foundational element of CLT is the development of communicative competence, which expands language ability beyond grammar and vocabulary to include pragmatic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse skills (Byram, 2021). Oxford (2020) emphasizes that communicative competence develops through meaningful input and sustained interaction rather than through isolated practice. In Ecuador, Cummins (2021) argues that students require opportunities to take risks, negotiate meaning, and

participate actively; without such experiences, English learning becomes passive and form-focused, limiting learners' ability to communicate effectively.

Due to, communicative learning environments depend heavily on teacher action, teacher roles in CLT implementation are crucial. Within communicative classrooms, teachers act not only as providers of knowledge but also as facilitators, mediators of meaning, and designers of learning experiences (Gay, 2023). Yet, González and Sierra (2022) note that teachers' beliefs strongly influence whether communicative approaches are adopted or resisted. When teachers perceive CLT as incompatible with standardized testing, classroom management, or the proficiency levels of their students, they often revert to traditional, teacher-centered methods. This indicates that professional development, teacher reflection, and institutional support are necessary conditions for shifting instructional practices toward communicative methodologies.

A key indicator of communicative environments is classroom interaction. Contreras-Espinosa & Villamizar-Mantilla (2021) define interaction as the cooperative development of language skills shaped through exchanges between teachers and students. Studies demonstrate that teacher-dominated interaction limits opportunities for authentic communication, whereas peer interaction—such as questioning, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning—supports communicative competence (Mora Pablo & García, 2021). Ellis (2021) further argues that interaction provides meaningful input, opportunities for output, and affective support that increase learner confidence. Consistent with this view, Ardi (2023) explains that interaction not only enhances language store but also boosts confidence and strengthens interpersonal connections among learners.

The Ecuadorian English curriculum (2016) explicitly promotes communicative competence, stating that “the development of the four communicative skills rather than linguistic content learning” (p. 193) should guide EFL instruction and that learners must

become users of English capable of engaging in meaningful oral and written communication. Nevertheless, classroom realities often diverge from these expectations. While some teachers incorporate communicative strategies such as conversation, listening tasks, reading activities, and guided analysis (Aquino et al., 2023), others rely heavily on grammar-translation or textbook-controlled routines due to limited training or methodological support. These challenges are reflected in learner experiences as well; Cedeño & Pincay (2021) report that students “feel there is a lot of pressure because they lack fluency and confidence so they do not want to be regarded as objects of ridicule.” Similarly, Macías & Guamán (2022) associate low communicative ability and poor motivation with an overemphasis on grammar as the main purpose of English instruction.

The gap between curriculum expectations and classroom practice remains one of the most persistent challenges in Ecuador. National evaluations and international comparisons reflect this misalignment: Ecuador ranks 82nd out of 111 countries in English proficiency according to English First (Chasi & Castro, 2023). While the 2016 curriculum and updated policy documents position communicative competence as the primary learning outcome (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2024), researchers note that classroom practices remain largely traditional (Hidalgo, 2023; Riera et al., 2024). Many students struggle to understand English because they have not received appropriate methodological foundations or have been exposed to inadequate programs (Riera et al., 2024). Effective implementation of communicative curricula therefore depends on the teacher’s role in promoting collaboration, addressing learners’ needs, and supporting them as they navigate uncertainties (Chasi & Ichina, 2023).

Overall, this misalignment demonstrates that the existence of a communicative curriculum alone is insufficient. Sustainable improvement requires comprehensive pedagogical transformation supported by teacher preparation, appropriate methodologies, and institutional reinforcement. For this reason, the present article conducts a literature-based analysis focused on strengthening teacher practices related

to CLT implementation in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms. This review synthesizes regional and international literature published between 2020 and 2025 on communicative competence, teacher roles, classroom interaction, and the policy–practice gap (Oxford, 2020; Ellis, 2021; Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2024). The goal is to provide evidence-based insights and strategies that bridge the persistent gap between curriculum expectations and classroom reality, contributing to the creation of meaningful, interactive, and context-responsive communicative environments for EFL learners in Ecuador.

Métodos y Materiales

This study follows a qualitative literature-review approach, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, books, and institutional documents published between 2020 and 2025. Searches were conducted using Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and publisher databases. Inclusion criteria considered relevance to CLT, EFL contexts, and applicability to Ecuadorian context. Sources without full access, DOI verification, or academic indexing were excluded. Findings were synthesized through thematic coding aligned with CLT dimensions: interaction, communicative competence, teacher roles, and sociocultural factors.

To ensure transparency and methodological veracity in this literature review, all consulted sources were systematically categorized according to their type and academic nature. This classification allows to understand the breadth and diversity of the materials analyzed, as well as the balance between empirical studies, theoretical contributions, and institutional documents. Table 1 summarizes the total number of sources in the literature review.

Table 1. *Classification of Sources Included in the Literature Review*

Type of source	Numbers of sources
Peer-reviewed journal articles	20
Academic books	6
Institutional documents	1
Undergraduate / graduate thesis	3
Total	30

Research design

The research adopts a descriptive and interpretative design, recognizing that insights into pedagogical practices emerge from existing empirical and theoretical studies. Instead of collecting primary data, the analysis is based on documented evidence from previously published research, allowing the study to evaluate how CLT has been conceptualized, applied, and discussed across educational contexts similar to Ecuador.

Sources and Inclusion Criteria

Academic sources were selected from reputable databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, SciELO, RedALyC, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and CrossRef DOI registry. The search focused on peer reviewed journal articles, academic books, and official policy documents published between 2020 and 2025, ensuring that the information reflects current perspectives in English language teaching and educational policy.

Studies were included if they met at least one of the following criteria:

- Addressed Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology
- Examined communicative competence or classroom interaction
- Focused on EFL contexts in Latin America or specifically in Ecuador
- Discussed teacher beliefs, training, or pedagogical practices
- Provided empirical or theoretical insights relevant to classroom implementation

Documents that lacked credible authorship, publication details, or verifiable access were excluded to ensure academic rigor and reliability.

Data analysis procedure

The selected sources were reviewed using thematic content analysis. Key concepts, findings, and arguments were categorized under the following themes:

1. Conceptualization of CLT and communicative competence
2. Teacher roles and pedagogical beliefs
3. Classroom interaction and communicative conditions
4. Challenges and opportunities for CLT implementation in Ecuador

Patterns, consistencies, and divergences across the literature were identified to construct a comprehensive framework that connects theoretical knowledge with practical implications

Analysis of results

The analysis of the selected literature reveals key findings related to the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms. Although the national curriculum promotes communicative competence as the core objective of English teaching, the reviewed studies show inconsistencies between policy expectations and instructional reality. The results are presented through emerging thematic categories.

Teacher Beliefs and Methodological Readiness

Teacher beliefs play a defining role in whether communicative approaches are adopted or resisted. González and Sierra (2022) note that while many teachers conceptually agree with CLT principles, they often revert to traditional instruction based on the perception that communicative lessons are time-consuming, difficult to control, or ineffective with low-proficiency students. This finding aligns with international research indicating that pedagogical change does not occur solely through policy mandates but through reflection, professional development, and alignment between teaching beliefs and classroom practice (Gay, 2023; Xiao & Wilkins, 2022).

Additional studies reinforce these concerns. Riera et al. (2024) emphasize that, “in order that this approach is successfully applied, teachers must be constantly trained and they also need to have access to resources that can be helpful for their classes and to improve the student’s engagement rate” (p. 5). This highlights a persistent challenge in the Ecuadorian context: teachers may conceptually value communicative methodologies, but without adequate training and sufficient didactic resources, they struggle to implement them effectively.

Similarly, Nisha (2024), in her comparative study of GTM and CLT, asserts that the success of communicative teaching depends fundamentally on the teacher’s

capacity to structure the classroom as a genuine communicative space. She explains that “setting up the classroom as a place for communication and communicative activities is the main responsibility of the CLT instructor,” since learners acquire the language more naturally when they engage in authentic contexts. Moreover, she notes that CLT draws from diverse perspectives within Second Language Acquisition rather than a single traditional method, suggesting that teachers require not only methodological knowledge but also pedagogical and flexible strategies to adapt communicative principles to their students’ needs.

Supporting this perspective, Riera et al. (2024) states that continuous teacher preparation and access to innovative materials are indispensable for sustaining communicative practices in real classrooms. Without these conditions, instructional decisions tend to default to traditional, teacher-centered approaches, regardless of curricular expectations.

Finally, the work of Al Ghafri et al. (2020) strengthens this argument by acknowledging the teacher’s responsibility to create an engaging climate that fosters immersion in the learning process. According to Al Ghafri (2020), “another role of the teacher in the classroom is creating an atmosphere in which students feel they are really immersed in what they are studying—having a warm and direct engagement with the content” (p. 155). This reinforces the idea that communicative approaches require not only methodological readiness but also the interpersonal and affective commitment of teachers.

Thus, these studies demonstrate that the implementation of CLT depends heavily on teacher beliefs, ongoing professional development, and the availability of appropriate resources. Without these elements, the communicative intentions promoted at the policy level cannot be fully realized in classroom practice.

Classroom Interaction Patterns

The literature also highlights the significant role of interaction in supporting language development. Studies show that teacher-centered interaction limits students' opportunities to negotiate meaning, participate actively, and develop confidence when using English (Mora Pablo & García, 2021). In contrast, classrooms that implement pair work, group tasks, role-plays, and problem-solving activities demonstrate higher levels of spontaneous communication and fluency (Oxford, 2020). Ellis (2021) reinforces that interaction provides comprehensible input and meaningful output two essential components for language acquisition.

In this sense, classroom interaction patterns “can be seen as specific methods of how teachers and students or students and students interact in teaching and learning processes” (Riyadini & Basikin, 2024, p. 30). Recent research further supports this view; for example, Shawaqfeh et al. (2024) argue that interaction has “a substantial influence on the process of learning a foreign language” due to it “possess a significant impact on linguistic proficiency and linguistic development, according to contemporary ELT models on learning a foreign language”. Similarly, Tshering (2021) highlights that language acquisition results from the dynamic interaction between learners' cognitive abilities and the linguistic environment (p. 2). Altogether, these perspectives reaffirm that classroom interaction is not merely a methodological choice but a central mechanism that shapes learners' communicative growth.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A relevant finding in the Ecuadorian context is the importance of culturally meaningful instruction. Gay (2023) and Byram (2021) emphasize that communicative environments improve when learning activities reflect students' cultural values, identities, and real-life experiences. When classroom communication feels artificial or disconnected from students' lives, motivation and engagement tend to decrease.

Recent studies support this view such as: Amjad et al. (2023) note that students are more motivated to learn when they feel their teachers genuinely care about them, highlighting the relational dimension of culturally responsive practice. Likewise, Zhong (2024) explains that positive interaction between teachers and students facilitates learning and comprehension, helping students acquire knowledge more effectively, and describes this interaction as a “positive pedagogical approach that promotes student engagement, comprehension, and learning outcomes” (p. 2) these findings suggest that culturally responsive and relationally supportive pedagogy strengthens both inclusion and communicative development, particularly in multilingual and multicultural regions of Ecuador.

Discussion

Despite identified challenges, the literature also points to potential opportunities. Teacher development programs, reflective practice, peer observation, and access to methodological support have demonstrated positive effects on instructional change. Studies from Latin America suggest that when teachers receive ongoing training focused on communicative strategies, classroom interaction becomes more dynamic, and learner participation increases (Hidalgo, 2023; González & Sierra, 2022). This aligns with (Rojas-Avilés et al., 2020, p. 88) “pedagogical innovation enables teachers to design creative and meaningful curricular proposals that enhance learning processes”.

Similarly, research on teacher training in Ecuador highlights that educational improvement depends on aligning instructional practices with the needs of each school context and its learners (Álvarez et al., 2024, pp. 31, 51). These authors also emphasize the importance of recognizing teachers not merely as curriculum implementers but as active participants with agency in the educational process. This perspective is consistent with broader Latin American findings, where innovation is considered an intrinsic

component of education that must respond to students' needs to support their holistic development (Rodríguez-Torres et al., 2024, p. 208).

These findings indicate that improving communicative environments is attainable when institutional structures and teacher capacities are aligned with curriculum expectations. As Beena (2024) states, "innovative teaching practices can help to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that keeps students engaged and motivated to actively participate in their own learning" (p. 1470), reinforcing the argument that teacher innovation plays a pivotal role in strengthening CLT implementation.

Consequently, the literature review demonstrates that the transition toward fully communicative classrooms in Ecuador is still in progress. The key factors influencing implementation include teacher beliefs, instructional preparedness, interaction patterns, and culturally responsive teaching. Strengthening teacher competence remains central to bridging the gap between theory and classroom reality.

Conclusion

The findings of this literature review demonstrate a clear and urgent reality: although Ecuador has officially embraced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the primary approach of its English curriculum, its practical implementation remains uneven and limited. The gap between policy and practice is influenced by a combination of factors, including teachers' methodological beliefs, insufficient training, limited exposure to communicative strategies, and classroom conditions that favor traditional instruction which is a systemic barrier that continues to undermine the development of communicative competence among Ecuadorian students.

The evidence is unequivocal. Teacher-centered practices, limited methodological training, and insufficient institutional support consistently prevent teachers from transforming their classrooms into communicative spaces where students can genuinely

use English for meaningful purposes. Research from Ecuador and comparable contexts demonstrates that without ongoing professional preparation, access to resources, and pedagogical autonomy, teachers cannot fully operationalize CLT even when they understand and value its principles.

A strong message emerges from the literature review; student communicative development improves only when teachers are empowered to adopt facilitator roles, promote interaction, design culturally relevant activities, and create emotionally supportive learning environments. Studies highlighting relational pedagogy and culturally responsive practices show that effective communication is not methodological: it is social, cultural, and human. Therefore, improving communicative competence in Ecuador is inseparable from improving teacher conditions, support, and preparation.

Ultimately, strengthening communicative environments in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms is not only a methodological challenge but also a structural one. Successful implementation of CLT depends on equipping teachers with the tools, knowledge, and conditions necessary to transform classroom interaction into a space where communication is both the means and the goal of learning. The literature review demonstrates that: the knowledge, research, and strategies already exist; thus, the next step is decisive action. Strengthening CLT implementation is not merely a methodological improvement; it is a strategic investment in the linguistic, academic, and social opportunities of Ecuadorian learners.

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