

## A Review of the Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Secondary School Teachers in Implementing the Communicative Method

دراسة مراجعيه للصعوبات التي تواجه مدرسي اللغة الإنكليزية في المدارس الثانوية العراقية في اعتماد الطريقة التواصلية

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## Abstract

This review explores the main difficulties Iraqi EFL secondary school teachers face when applying the communicative language teaching (CLT) method in classrooms. These include insufficient training programs, weak English proficiency, overcrowded classrooms, rigid curriculum design, and poor teaching facilities. Cultural attitudes and exam-driven assessment also limit communicative interaction. There remains a clear gap between CLT theory and its actual classroom application. The study suggests major reforms in teacher education, curriculum, testing methods, and student motivation.

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المستخلص :

تتناول هذه المراجعة أبرز الصعوبات التي يواجهها مدرسو اللغة الإنكليزية في المدارس الثانوية العراقية عند تطبيق طريقة التدريس التواصلية (CLT) داخل الصفوف. وتشمل هذه الصعوبات ضعف برامج التدريب، وانخفاض كفاءة اللغة الإنكليزية لدى بعضهم ، و الصفوف الدراسية المكتظة ، وجمود تصميم المناهج، وضعف الإمكانيات التعليمية. كما تسهم المواقف الثقافية ونظام التقييم القائم على الامتحانات في الحد من التفاعل التواصلية داخل الفصل. ولا تزال هناك فجوة واضحة بين نظرية CLT وتطبيقها العملي. وتترح الدراسة إصلاحات شاملة في إعداد المعلمين، والمناهج، وأساليب التقييم، وتحفيز الطلبة..

**Keywords:** Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Difficulties' of Iraqi EFL Teachers,

## Introduction

Over the past 50 years, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has taken a leading role in reshaping how second and foreign languages are taught. It marked a clear departure from outdated, teacher-dominated models toward a learner-centered approach, where students are placed at the heart of the learning process and teachers act more as facilitators, guides, and monitors. CLT also introduced a new mindset—one that emphasizes real-life communication and authentic interaction against the traditional approach of memorization of grammar rules or an obsession with linguistic precision. The core aim is to build meaningful fluency and communicative competence rooted in practical needs.

Although the Iraqi curriculum officially adopted CLT principles, many teachers still struggle with serious challenges that hinder its successful implementation. These difficulties are not solely pedagogical; they are deeply connected to the country's post-2003 social, political, and educational transformations. In reality, despite institutional endorsement of CLT, traditional grammar-translation methods continue to dominate many classrooms, almost as if they were an immovable legacy. This review examines a range of local studies focused on the use of CLT in Iraqi secondary schools. By analyzing the main obstacles facing Iraqi EFL teachers, it aims to offer informed recommendations that could help narrow the gap between official educational reform and actual classroom practice.

## 1. Theoretical Background

In educational foundations and linguistic perspectives, the communicative approach is considered one of the leading methods, focusing on enhancing learners' linguistic competence and communicative ability through the use of authentic texts drawn from daily life, embedded within real-life language interaction. The cornerstone of the communicative approach is that the learner takes center stage, while the teacher's role is supportive—helping the learner to use the four language skills in a way that builds confidence and flexibility, enabling effective and fluent use of the foreign language (Richards, 2006). In the Iraqi educational context, the official national curricula have adopted the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach for learning English in schools. The most recent curriculum reform was titled English for Iraq. However, despite the shift in educational policy and the adoption of a new approach, traditional teaching methods still dominate. This is largely due to teachers' inability to implement CLT, given the numerous obstacles and challenges that prevent them from embracing modern approaches to English language teaching. (Manfi, 2023). Teachers in some Asian and Middle Eastern countries, in particular, struggle to implement the communicative curricula adopted in their nations. This is largely due to poor educational environments, which are typically

characterized by overcrowded classrooms, limited and inadequate teaching resources, and exam systems that are rigid and focus on traditional assessment goals. (Littlewood ,2007). Similarly, a study by (Audil and Mustafa 2024) revealed that many Iraqi secondary school teachers still strongly adhere to traditional grammar-based methods and view the communicative approach as difficult to implement. This is largely due to a lack of both professional and psychological training needed to shift long-standing attitudes and overcome inherited traditional practices in favor of more modern teaching methods. Moreover, the difficulty lies in the institution's inability to provide the necessary support, such as adequate resources, language labs, and infrastructure. Cultural and social attitudes also play a role, often resisting or rejecting the shift towards communicative and learner-centered approaches.

## 2. Review of Iraqi Studies

This part of the review discusses the findings of many researchers in the field of Iraqi education regarding the challenges and difficulties that have prevented Iraqi teachers from successfully implementing the (CLT) in Iraq.

### 2.1 Teacher Preparedness and Training

A number of studies have confirmed that Iraq EFL lack the necessary training to effectively implement the (CLT) in classrooms. (Brime & Abdullah, 2020) confirm that many teachers were trained based on the principles of the traditional methods, particularly the grammar-translation approach, and received limited support and training regarding the (CLT) approach. Similarly, Amin (2018) indicates that short-term workshops rarely offer practical, hands-on skills necessary for successful CLT implementation. These gaps in training contribute significantly to teachers' lack of confidence and competence in conducting communicative activities. Supporting this view, Audil and Mustafa (2024) emphasize that most professional development programs remain theoretical in nature, without focusing on real classroom applications. Accordingly, "Iraqi English language teachers do not fully implement communicative approach in their classroom practices" (Fattah & Saidalvi, 2019, p. 1143).

### 2.2 Curriculum and Textbooks

(ALMuttalibi, 2021) analyzes the "English for Iraq" textbooks in general and noted that although they contain communicative tasks, the majority of classroom time is devoted to grammar exercises and vocabulary drills aimed at exam preparation. Teachers often feel

pressured to cover the entire syllabus in limited time, leaving little room for authentic communication practice. This tendency reflects a broader systemic issue, as the national curriculum emphasizes accuracy and memorization over fluency and interaction. . Furthermore, most teachers skip communicative sections altogether due to time constraints and lack of proper training. Likewise, Testing policies in Iraq still align with traditional examination formats, which do not support the educational community's belief that speaking and communication can be assessed in national exams. As a result, teachers tend to teach with the aim of preparing students for pen-and-paper tests rather than fostering communicative competence."

### 2.3 Classroom Environment and Resources

Research by Obaid et al. (2022) highlighted several major challenges facing classrooms in Iraq, including a lack of teaching aids, severe overcrowding, and limited educational resources within the learning environment, which remains predominantly traditional in nature. Such a context, with all its drawbacks, directly hinders the successful implementation of the (CLT) particularly when considering activities related to collaborative learning, group work, classroom discussions, interactive tasks, and role-playing, all of which are fundamental components of CLT. Overcrowded classrooms pose a significant obstacle to effective classroom management, often resulting in wasted time and effort, and reducing the chances of using available resources and activities in a meaningful and effective way that supports communicative learning goals.

Thajeel and Dakhil (2023) point out that the lack of technological support, such as language laboratories and modern projectors, makes it extremely difficult to utilize authentic materials like videos and illustrated stories. Many teachers still rely on traditional tools such as the blackboard and chalk, which contribute to a negative, uninspiring, and inflexible classroom environment that lacks comfort for students. Moreover, a considerable number of classrooms are deprived of basic comfort and recreational facilities, such as air conditioning, proper seating, and adequate lighting. These unfavorable conditions have a demotivating and negative impact on the lesson as a whole.

### 2.4. Student' Attitudes and Motivation

Obaid et al. (2022) investigated students' attitudes towards speaking activities in which students' showed high levels of anxiety, nervousness, and an inability to communicate with their peers. The study confirmed that such high anxiety and nervousness indicate a lack of linguistic competence and proficiency. Fear of making mistakes and their inability to grasp the concept of learner-centeredness, as opposed to teacher-centeredness, have made it difficult to

create a positive classroom environment. This is particularly true given the students' negative psychological conditions, attitudes, and beliefs.

Similarly, Azeez and Haji (2024) reported that many Iraqi EFL learners avoid participating in classroom activities that require speaking in the foreign language due to a lack of self-confidence. They fear being criticized by their peers and bullied—an issue rooted in societal culture by fearing of making mistakes. The researchers also have found that students' educational culture is deeply influenced by their parents' traditional beliefs, which view the teacher as the sole authority who dominates classroom talk. As a result, speaking tasks in class are perceived as a threat rather than an enjoyable experience. Consequently, students believe they should avoid speaking to prevent embarrassment and exposure to mockery.

### 2.5 Assessment Practices

Audil and Mustafa (2024) emphasize that there is a clear mismatch between the intended goals of the (CLT) approach and the design and format of national examinations in Iraq. The focus still remains on grammar and reading comprehension. In fact, the written national exams are far removed from assessing spoken fluency, which is one of the core aims of CLT. As a result, teachers realize that there is little point in spending time on a skill that is not subject to examination.

According to Fattah and Saidalvi (2019), many teachers report experiencing pressure to “teach to the test,” As they tend to neglect the speaking and listening skills and focus primarily on reading and writing. Since speaking and listening are absent from national examinations, they are considered unimportant by both teachers and students. Without comprehensive reforms in testing policies and evaluation standards, the implementation of CLT will likely remain superficial, symbolic, and ineffective in truly transforming English language education in Iraqi secondary schools.

## 3. Analysis of the Challenges

Based on the review of many Iraqi studies on the difficulties and challenges accompanying the attempt to implement CLT in Iraqi secondary schools, these challenges can be analyzed and categorized as follows::

### 3.1 Pedagogical Challenges

The lack of pre-service and in-service training is considered one of the main obstacles preventing teachers from performing their duties efficiently. In the light of the ongoing changes in English language curricula in Iraq, this transformation clashes with the issue of insufficient training. English language teachers often suffer from poor training and limited language proficiency, which hinders their ability to manage the classroom in a way that fosters

an interactive, communicative, and collaborative environment among students. As a result, teachers tend to fall back on the traditional model that secures their position within the authoritative zone of teaching—a role rooted in rigid instruction and inherited cultural norms.

### 3.2 Institutional Challenges

The lack of supporting resources required for communicative classrooms—such as visual aids, modern projectors, and audio equipment essential for listening activities—represents a significant obstacle that cannot be overlooked in modern teaching methods. To make matters worse, many classrooms are outdated, overcrowded with students, and follow a traditional seating arrangement. All of this makes it nearly impossible, if not entirely unfeasible, to implement group-based teaching, which is a core element of CLT activities. There is simply no space or suitable environment in such conventional classrooms for interactive learning. This highlights what may be the main reason behind teachers' reluctance to adopt the modern method, as it suits only small, uncrowned classrooms that equipped with appropriate teaching aids.

### 3.3 Sociocultural Challenges

Psychological barriers among Iraqi EFL secondary EFL students are considered a major factor contributing to the failure of the communicative approach. Iraqi students remain confined by social traditions, the authority of the teacher, and their own passive roles in the classroom. This inherited mindset causes students to feel anxious about speaking in the foreign language, fearing criticism from their peers—something that is certainly exacerbated by overcrowded classrooms. As a result, students tend to avoid interaction, cooperation, and communication in English due to fear of bullying or embarrassment over their weak language skills. This leads to a continuing cycle of linguistic weakness within the classroom, as students retreat into a narrow range of short, grammar-based or vocabulary-focused responses, merely reacting to the teacher and his overall authority.

### 3.4 Assessment Challenges

In Iraq, the national exams focus on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary while neglecting speaking and listening skills. In fact this is one of the key factors that drives both teachers and learners to disregard modern teaching approaches. Teachers prepare their students for the exam, not for linguistic competence, fluency, or effective speaking. They rely on the educational policy that emphasizes pen-and-paper testing, where marks are awarded based on what the student writes, not what they say. This is where the core of the problem lies: neither students nor their parents value efforts to develop speaking skills, as long as those skills are not part of the standardized grading system in national examinations. Instead, they focus

on reading and writing, as dictated by the teachers. All of this represents a significant barrier that prevents teachers from allocating time for communicative speaking activities. These are seen as unnecessary extras, since they contribute nothing to the student's final exam grade.

### Discussion

The review clearly shows a substantial gap between the theoretical foundations of CLT and the realities in Iraqi secondary school classrooms. While the Ministry of Education promotes communicative teaching, systemic issues hinder practical application. Teacher preparation programs must be overhauled to include practical CLT training and ongoing professional development. Additionally, classroom environments need improvement in terms of physical space and teaching resources. Students' negative attitudes toward communicative activities require gradual exposure and motivational strategies to build confidence. Importantly, national assessment systems must evolve to evaluate communicative competence alongside traditional language skills. Moreover, stakeholder collaboration, policy support, and long-term investment are essential to ensure the sustainable implementation of communicative methodologies and measurable progress in learners' outcomes.

### Recommendations

To address the challenges identified, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Revise Teacher Training Programs:** Implement comprehensive pre-service and continuous in-service training focused on practical CLT strategies, effective classroom management for interactive activities, enhancement of spoken English proficiency, and the use of real-life communication scenarios.
2. **Curriculum and Textbook Reform:** Adapt current textbooks to include more culturally relevant and meaningful communicative tasks, promote authentic language use, and reduce the overemphasis on traditional grammar drills and rote memorization.
3. **Improve Classroom Conditions:** Reduce class sizes where feasible, provide flexible seating arrangements, and equip classrooms with modern audio-visual aids and technology that support student-centered, interactive language learning experiences.

4. Modify Assessment Methods: Incorporate oral, listening, and real-life communication components into national exams by designing tasks such as interviews, role-plays, and interactive listening exercises. These should be evaluated through rubrics that measure fluency, pronunciation, interaction, and understanding, to better align testing with communicative teaching goals and promote language use beyond written skills.

5. Promote Positive Student Attitudes: Use engaging, confidence-building activities such as role-plays and games, foster a supportive classroom atmosphere, encourage regular peer interaction, and celebrate students' efforts to reduce anxiety and boost willingness to speak English.

### Conclusion

The adoption of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in Iraq represents a significant and hopeful step towards the future of English language learning. However, mere adoption is not sufficient without actual implementation. In Iraq, years after embracing the communicative approach, a range of challenges have emerged that hinder its effective application. These include educational, institutional, social, cultural, and assessment-related factors. The gap between adoption and implementation must be narrowed or eliminated by focusing on these obstacles and encouraging collective efforts from all stakeholders. Effective strategic planning can serve as a lifeline to mitigate the impact of these challenges. There must be a serious commitment to improving the learning environment, enhancing teachers' capabilities, fostering a spirit of collaboration among students, addressing inherited psychological barriers, and reforming evaluation and testing systems. These systems must reflect students' speaking and listening abilities, in addition to reading and writing skills, in order for CLT to succeed — as it has in countries that have achieved remarkable progress in learning English as a foreign language .

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