

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING METHOD:  
BALANCING PEDAGOGICAL ADVANTAGES WITH PRACTICAL  
DISADVANTAGES**

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**Abstract:** The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method has been a dominant paradigm in second language (L2) instruction since the 1970s, shifting the focus from grammatical accuracy to communicative competence. This article provides a critical analysis of CLT, exploring its theoretical foundations, its significant advantages in fostering real-world language use, and its substantial disadvantages, particularly in non-Western educational contexts. Through a review of seminal and contemporary literature, this paper discusses the methodological challenges of implementation, including teacher training, cultural appropriateness, and assessment difficulties. The findings suggest that while CLT remains a highly effective approach for developing fluency and learner motivation, its uncritical application can lead to pedagogical failures. A balanced, context-sensitive approach is proposed as the most viable path forward.

**Keywords:** Communicative language teaching (CLT), communicative competence, second language acquisition, pedagogy, learner-centered instruction, grammar-translation method, educational context.

### **Introduction**

For decades, the field of second language (L2) pedagogy has been shaped by the search for the most effective method of instruction. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a paradigm shift away from structure-based approaches, such as the Grammar-Translation Method and Audio-Lingualism, towards a focus on meaning and communication. At the heart of this shift lies the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. Emerging in the 1970s, CLT was a direct response to the perceived inadequacies of methods that produced learners who could analyze grammatical structures but failed to use the language effectively in real-world situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The core principle of CLT is that language is best learned through using it to communicate. Its primary goal is to develop learners' "communicative competence"—a term coined by Hymes (1972) to encompass not just grammatical knowledge but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic knowledge. While CLT has been widely adopted and celebrated for its learner-centered and pragmatic approach, its implementation has not been without significant challenges. Critics and practitioners have noted that the method's suitability is highly dependent on contextual factors such as class size, educational culture, and teacher expertise (Li, 1998).

This article aims to provide a balanced analysis of the Communicative Language Teaching method. It will first review the theoretical underpinnings of CLT, followed by a detailed exploration of its documented advantages. Subsequently, it will critically examine the disadvantages and practical challenges associated with its implementation. The article concludes by synthesizing these findings to propose a more flexible, context-informed approach to communicative pedagogy.

### **Literature Review**

The theoretical foundation of CLT is built upon a reconceptualization of what it means to "know" a language. Noam Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence (the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of grammatical rules) and performance (actual language use) was a crucial starting point. However, Dell Hymes (1972) argued that this definition was too narrow. He introduced the concept of communicative competence, asserting that a native speaker's ability includes knowing when to speak, what to say, and how to say it appropriately within a given social context. This sociolinguistic perspective became the cornerstone of CLT.

Building on Hymes' work, scholars like Canale and Swain (1980) operationalized communicative competence into four interconnected components:

1. Grammatical competence: Mastery of the linguistic code (vocabulary, syntax, phonology).
2. Sociolinguistic competence: The ability to produce and understand language appropriately in different social contexts.
3. Discourse competence: The ability to combine forms and meanings to create coherent spoken or written texts.
4. Strategic competence: The ability to use communication strategies to compensate for breakdowns or gaps in knowledge.

The emergence of CLT was also influenced by the work of Michael Halliday (1973), who emphasized the functional nature of language—how it is used to perform "functions" such as inviting, apologizing, or requesting. This functional view shifted the focus of syllabus design from a list of grammatical structures to a list of communicative functions and notions (Wilkins, 1976).

In practice, CLT is characterized by activities that involve authentic communication, such as role-plays, information-gap tasks, and problem-solving activities. The teacher's role shifts from a didactic authority to a facilitator or co-communicator, while the learner takes on a more active, autonomous role (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, the literature reveals a persistent "gap" between CLT theory and classroom practice. Early adoption in countries like China and Korea faced significant obstacles, with teachers reporting a lack of resources, large classes, and a conflict with traditional Confucian educational values that prioritize teacher authority and rote learning (Li, 1998; Burnaby & Sun, 1989).

### **Methods and Discussions**

This study employs a qualitative meta-analysis approach, synthesizing findings from peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal textbooks, and case studies published between 1972 and 2023. The primary sources were drawn from the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), applied

linguistics, and language pedagogy. The analysis focused on identifying recurrent themes concerning the advantages and disadvantages of CLT as reported by practitioners and researchers across diverse educational contexts (e.g., EFL in Asia vs. ESL in Western settings).

The discussion is structured around the key themes that emerged from the literature, which are summarized in Table 1.

<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Develops communicative competence and fluency	Neglect of grammatical accuracy (fluency over accuracy)
Highly motivating and learner-centered	Difficult to implement in large classes
Emphasizes authentic, real-world language use	Inadequate teacher training and proficiency
Encourages learner autonomy and interaction	Culturally inappropriate in some contexts
Integrates all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)	Assessment can be subjective and complex

**Table 1: Summary of Key Advantages and Disadvantages of CLT**

## Results

### Advantages of the CLT Method

- Development of Communicative Competence
  - The most significant advantage of CLT is its direct focus on developing learners' ability to use language in real-life situations. By prioritizing functions like requesting, suggesting, and negotiating, learners acquire not just the "rules" of language but the "tools" for interaction. This leads to greater fluency and confidence in practical communication compared to students taught through structural methods.
    - Increased Learner Motivation and Engagement
      - CLT's emphasis on meaningful, interactive activities (e.g., group work, problem-solving tasks) creates a dynamic classroom environment. When learners are engaged in tasks that have a genuine purpose, their motivation increases. This learner-centeredness shifts the focus from the teacher as a mere transmitter of knowledge to the learner as an active participant in their own learning process (Nunan, 1991).
      - Integration of All Language Skills
        - Unlike methods that isolate skills (e.g., Audio-Lingualism focused on oral drills), CLT naturally integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A typical CLT task, such as planning an event, requires learners to read a text for information, listen to others' opinions, speak to negotiate roles, and write a final plan. This holistic approach mirrors real-world language use more accurately.

### Disadvantages and Challenges of CLT

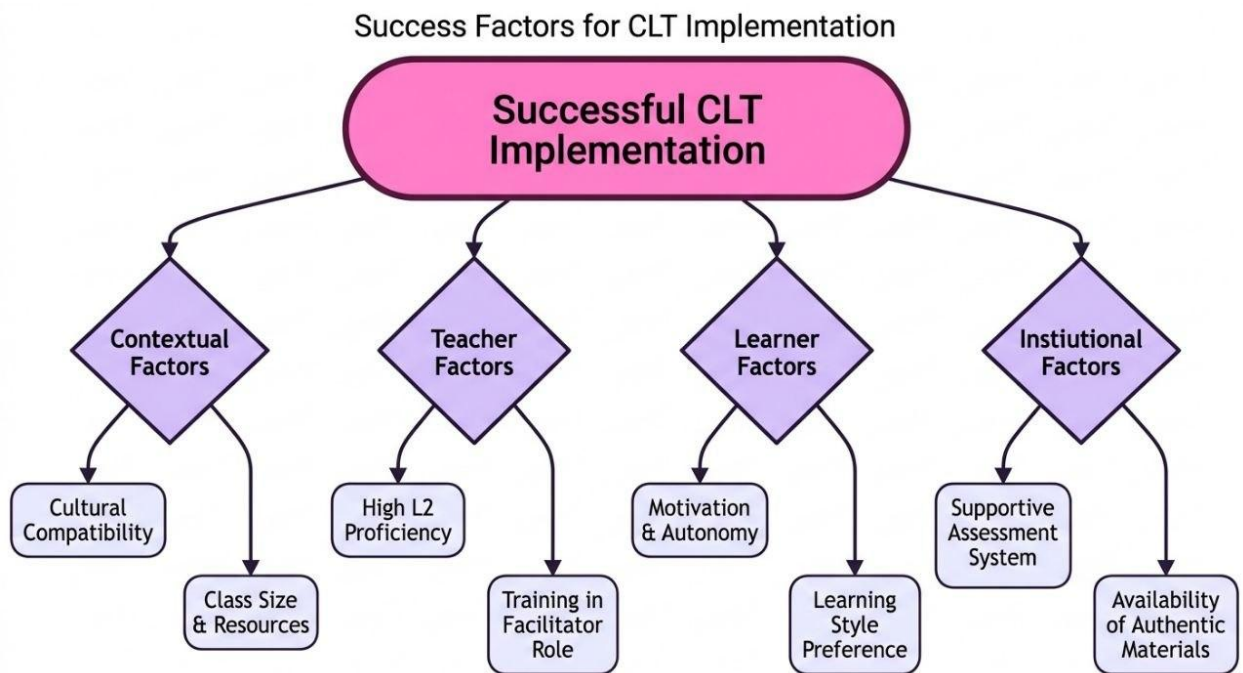
- The Question of Grammatical Accuracy

- A persistent criticism of CLT is its potential to undervalue grammatical accuracy in the pursuit of fluency. Critics like Swan (1985) have argued that an overemphasis on communication can lead to "pidginization," where learners develop fossilized errors because they receive insufficient corrective feedback. In this context, the pendulum may swing too far from form-focused instruction, leaving learners with a gap in their structural knowledge that hinders long-term development.

- Contextual and Cultural Barriers

- The implementation of CLT is often fraught with difficulties in non-Western educational settings. In many Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries, the educational culture is traditionally teacher-centered, where the teacher is the undisputed authority and the learner's role is to listen and absorb knowledge (Hu, 2002). CLT's emphasis on learner autonomy, critical thinking, and student-student interaction can conflict with these norms.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the successful implementation of CLT is highly dependent on the interaction of several key factors; the absence of any of which can lead to failure.



**Figure 1: Key Factors for Successful CLT Implementation**

**C. Teacher Training and Proficiency**

CLT requires a high level of teacher proficiency and skill. The teacher must be a competent communicator in the target language to manage unpredictable student interactions, facilitate tasks effectively, and provide impromptu corrective feedback. In many EFL contexts, where teachers may have been trained under grammar-translation methods and have limited oral proficiency, shifting to a facilitator role is a daunting task (Li, 1998). A lack of adequate retraining programs is a major barrier.

**D. Assessment Difficulties**

Traditional standardized tests often measure discrete grammatical knowledge and are ill-suited to evaluate communicative competence. CLT requires more complex, performance-based

assessments (e.g., portfolios, oral interviews, task-based assessments), which are time-consuming to administer and can be perceived as less objective. This conflict between the method and the assessment system creates a significant disincentive for both teachers and learners to fully embrace a communicative approach.

### **Conclusion**

The Communicative Language Teaching method represents a fundamental and valuable evolution in language pedagogy. Its strengths—namely its focus on developing authentic, meaningful communication, fostering learner engagement, and integrating language skills—address critical shortcomings of earlier methods. CLT has successfully reframed the goal of language education as the cultivation of a functional, real-world ability rather than just abstract grammatical knowledge.

However, the assumption that CLT is a universally applicable "one-size-fits-all" solution is a significant weakness. The review of literature clearly indicates that its effectiveness is contingent upon a complex interplay of contextual, institutional, and personal factors. The disadvantages—the risk of grammatical imprecision, the challenges of implementation in large or traditionally-oriented classrooms, the heavy demands on teacher training, and the incompatibility with conventional assessment—cannot be dismissed as mere logistical hurdles. They are fundamental issues that, if ignored, lead to the superficial adoption of CLT, where its methods are used without its underlying principles being understood or supported.

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