



Investigating the ELT-based Reform in Iranian Senior High Schools: An Activity Theory Analysis

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Abstract

The implementation of a curriculum involves numerous variables and entities, both individual and institutional, which makes it a complex and multifaceted process in education. Implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) curricula has proven challenging in various global contexts. The present study, using a human activity system model, investigated CLT implementation in Iranian senior high schools. There were four groups of participants in this qualitative study, including 20 teachers, 28 students, 10 teacher directors, and 10 parents. We used semi-structured interviews and class observations. The study's findings highlight several significant obstacles to implementing CLT in the examined educational setting. Key challenges include teachers' reliance on traditional methods despite acknowledging the benefits of communicative activities, inadequate professional development, and insufficient familiarity with CLT principles. Students face issues such as demotivation, overdependence on teachers, and limited opportunities to engage with English outside the classroom. Additionally, logistical difficulties, such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient educational materials, and non-communicative assessments, combined with a lack of cooperation among educators and restricted teacher autonomy, further hinder the effectiveness of CLT. Based on these findings, we proposed several solutions and pedagogical implications to facilitate the successful implementation of this curriculum reform.

Keywords: CLT Implementation, Iranian Senior High School, CLT-based Curriculum, Activity Theory

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Curriculum, defined as the carefully reconstructed experiences and desired outcomes supervised by schools to enhance personal-social competence (Tanner & Tanner, 2006), is a critical component of education aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness. In the realm of English language teaching, curriculum development has been closely tied to evolving teaching methodologies. Historically, traditional grammar-based approaches like the Grammar-Translation method dominated (Fotos, 2005). However, by the 1960s, widespread dissatisfaction with these methods' ineffectiveness in real-life situations (e.g., Mazher et al., 2015) sparked a shift towards more communicative approaches.

This shift gained momentum in the early 1970s with Hymes' (1971) introduction of 'communicative competence', emphasizing the social aspect of language use. Consequently, a significant curriculum reform began to materialize globally (Campbell-Phillips, 2020), moving towards CLT. However, a critical issue emerged: these curriculum changes were typically implemented in a top-down manner, often neglecting the crucial role of teachers as the primary implementers of these reforms (Rahimi & Alavi, 2017).

Similarly, through a top-down decision-making process, the Iranian language education curriculum underwent considerable changes with the intention of incorporating the CLT approach in 2013, marking a significant shift from traditional methods such as grammar-translation. However, a change in curriculum does not guarantee full implementation since, like any other phenomenon that does not take place in a vacuum, different agents influence the outcome. Contrary to the beliefs of the authorities who introduced these changes, the teacher plays a crucial role in implementing the curriculum (Campbell, 2012). In addition to the teacher, there are myriads of interdependent variables that might create challenges for language teachers to adopt CLT in the classroom (Rahman et al., 2018). There have been complicated difficulties, such as the need to change long-held beliefs and acquire pedagogical competencies (e.g., Fullan, 1992, 2007; Synder et al., 1992).

Past research around the globe has indicated that the full implementation was not successful for several reasons, including teachers' preference for teacher-centered instruction, adherence to traditional approaches, students' low English proficiency, cultural apprehensions, and conflicting educational policies (e.g., Carless, 2001; Chishipula, 2016; Dailey, 2010; Harrison, 1996; Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Karim, 2004). Using self-reported data, other scholars conducted studies on the same topic (e.g., Choi, 2000; Kim, 2002; Li, 1998). For the first time in South Korea, Kim (2008) conducted a study employing Engeström's human activity theory (1993, 2014) to examine the

implementation of CLT-based curricular reform in the educational context. This study indicated that adherence to traditional methods was the main culprit for the unsuccessful implementation (Kim, 2008).

This endeavor has also been unsuccessful in the Iranian educational environment. Previous studies, particularly those by Barabadi and Razmjoo (2016) and Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015), demonstrated that there were obstacles to the implementation of CTL reform in junior high schools. In their first study, Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015), through the lens of the activity theory system, concluded that the most noticeable contradiction was between the perception of language teachers and the Ministry of Education's introduction to CLT-based curriculum. The second study (Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2016), similar to some previous studies, indicated that teachers' low proficiency, their inability to use pair work or group work, and parents' and students' resistance to some aspects of the CLT approach were the major contradictions in the way of implementation.

In light of these challenges, the current study aims to understand how the CLT-based approach is actually implemented in senior high schools from an activity system perspective. According to this perspective, an individual or individuals are not the only agents that influence an activity. That is, the components present in the environment also affect the intended activity's outcome. The investigation of these different variables within an activity system can provide researchers with valuable insight into how different phenomena occur. Consequently, achieving communicative competence is not acquired in a vacuum; there are several parties involved in shaping this competence. Engeström's human activity theory (1999, 2018) is employed to examine the extent of CLT implementation in Iranian senior high schools, with a focus on the interconnected components of the English education activity system, including learners, textbooks, parents, schools, and teachers. Given this background, our main participants were English language teachers. The researchers also acquired information from students, parents, teacher directors, and textbooks to see to what extent the practices are in line with the curriculum designed by policymakers.

By applying this language education approach, Iranian English education could be enhanced and provide valuable insights for similar educational contexts worldwide. Based on this, our research questions are:

1. To what extent is English education in Iranian senior high schools in line with the top-down CLT-based curriculum as designed by policymakers?
2. What potential contradictions, viewed through the lens of activity theory, may arise in Iranian senior high school language teachers' instruction due to new curricular changes?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The human activity system, developed from Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediation, is crucial for understanding the context of this study. Building on Vygotsky's work, Engeström (1999) devised a model that involves communal activity (Figure 1, below).

The activity system model analyzes two aspects: the subject, which is a person or group, and the object, which represents the action and direction of the activity. The object is dynamic, constantly shaped, and changed by mediating artifacts. For example, if English education aims to enhance communicative skills through grammar-based tests, the object changes into a result due to the mediation of grammar teaching.

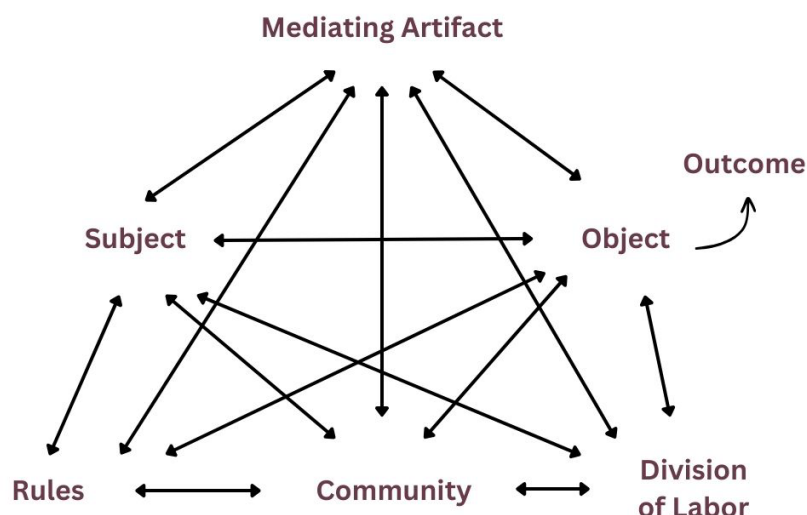


Figure 1. *An activity system model (Engeström, 1999)*

The activity system is composed of three key elements: rules, community, and division of labor. The "community" refers to those focused on the same objective, such as Iranian English teachers, teacher directors, school staff, and parents. The "division of labor" involves the distribution of responsibilities both vertically and horizontally. "Rules," which can be explicit or implicit, dictate the interactions within the system. Internal conflicts, driven by contradictions between individual actions and the broader activity system, are central to the system's development and change. These conflicts occur at various levels and are essential for understanding and evolving the activity system (Engeström, 2014; Johnson, 2009).

Empirical Studies

The foundational components and contradictions within the activity system provide a framework for examining the implementation of curriculum reforms across various educational contexts. Numerous studies have explored language education curriculum reform, offering diverse perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in this field (e.g., Agrawal, 2004; Law, 2014; Pietarinen et al., 2016; Razmjoo & Barabadi, 2015; Shay, 2015).

For instance, Agrawal's (2004) research investigated the link between evaluation practices and curriculum improvements, focusing on whether changes in evaluation could drive curriculum adjustments. Law (2014) analyzed curriculum-making frameworks and developed a Chinese curriculum-making model, highlighting the complexities and constraints of China's curricular reform since the early 1990s. Similarly, Pietarinen et al. (2016) examined Finland's national curriculum development process, focusing on implementation strategies, reform goals, and stakeholder involvement. Shay (2015) explored the tensions in curriculum changes, analyzing how these issues manifest across different settings. In Iran, Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015) investigated the 2013 English curriculum reform based on CLT implemented in public schools.

Further studies have delved into specific aspects of curriculum implementation. Rasti (2018) explored Iranian teachers' perspectives on educational policy changes, highlighting the lack of support and the prevalence of a "teach-to-the-test" culture as major obstacles to effective curriculum implementation. Huang and Yang (2018) examined Taiwanese teachers' needs to improve CLT practices, emphasizing the importance of developing communicative proficiency and securing support from school authorities.

Rahman et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study on teachers' experiences with a CLT-based curriculum, revealing a gap between intended curriculum outcomes and actual classroom practices. Their findings pointed to misunderstandings about teaching and learning, student proficiency levels, and inadequate teacher preparation as significant barriers.

Finally, Barabadi and Razmjoo (2016) revisited the Iranian context, using Engeström's human activity system model to analyze junior high school curriculum reform. Their study highlighted the challenges associated with CLT implementation, emphasizing the need for comprehensive in-service programs and recognizing the role of various stakeholders beyond teachers in overcoming these challenges.

In summary, the reviewed studies collectively underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of curriculum reform in language education. While Agrawal (2004), Law (2014), and Pietarinen et al. (2016) highlight the broader structural and strategic challenges of implementing national curriculum changes, other studies, such as those by Rasti (2018) and Rahman et al. (2019), emphasize the practical obstacles faced by teachers on the ground, including resistance to change and misunderstandings about the intended pedagogical approaches. The recurring themes across these studies—such as the need for teacher support, stakeholder involvement, and the alignment of assessment methods with curriculum goals—point to the importance of a holistic approach to curriculum reform that considers both systemic and local factors. In particular, the Iranian context explored by Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015) and Barabadi and Razmjoo (2016) offers a nuanced view of the specific challenges and contradictions that arise when implementing CLT in a rigid educational environment. These insights form a critical foundation for understanding how CLT-based reforms are implemented and the various factors that influence their success or failure in different educational settings.

Method

Participants

This study included contributions from four different groups of participants. The majority of participants were 20 language teachers who taught English in the tenth and eleventh grades. All participating instructors completed their primary and secondary education in Iranian public schools. 15 teachers had a BA, and 5 had an MA in TEFL. Most participating teachers' teaching experiences were limited to secondary schools, where they had taught English using traditional approaches. The second largest group consisted of ten teacher directors, whose roles involve enhancing the educational environment, promoting self-leadership through self-knowledge, goal setting, and motivation, fostering a positive school culture, overseeing curriculum implementation, managing human relations, and providing effective supervision and guidance (Razavi et al., 2022). There were also 28 students and 10 parents, which made up two groups.

Since there were four groups, a variety of purposive sampling methods were used. First, maximum variation sampling was used to encompass a wide range of views. Then, criterion sampling was employed to choose cases with a wealth of information. Finally, for practical reasons, the researchers selected convenience sampling. The researchers started with teachers and teacher directors, using maximum variation sampling to include participants with diverse characteristics such as gender, teaching tenure, and working

contexts (for example, urban, rural, and inner-city schools). Previous research (Kim, 2008; Wang, 2006) identified these traits as crucial in the implementation of the new curriculum. The researchers gained access to school sites through official permission from the local education department. With a written letter of authorization, they were able to enter schools and conduct criterion sampling among students in classrooms taught by the participating teachers. Finally, the researchers questioned ten parents who volunteered their time to help them learn about their expectations of language teachers, their children, and English instruction in public schools in general. Throughout the research, pseudonyms were used to conceal the identities of the participants.

Instruments

Utilizing a diverse range of data increases the likelihood of acquiring reliable and credible results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In pursuit of addressing the research inquiries, two instruments were employed: interviews and classroom observations.

Interview Protocol

To conduct the interviews, a structured interview protocol was developed to ensure consistency and depth in the data collection process. First, the researchers introduced the research and its purpose to each participant, providing them with an understanding of the study's objectives and the significance of their contributions. This introduction was crucial for establishing rapport and ensuring that participants were comfortable and informed about the process.

Then, a set of questions was prepared for each type of interview, tailored to the specific aspects of the research. These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' experiences, challenges, and perspectives related to the implementation of the CLT curriculum.

Two researchers conducted the interviews, and each session lasted approximately ten to thirty minutes. The sessions were conducted in Persian, which was the primary language of the participants, to ensure that they could express their thoughts comfortably and accurately.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observation is a valuable tool for assessing teaching practices. To evaluate the implementation of CLT characteristics in the new curriculum, an observation checklist was developed. Researchers observed classes to determine the presence of these characteristics. Conducting research in Iranian schools requires official authorization, and

researchers often face administrative challenges. For instance, while both boys' and girls' schools were observed, gaining access to girls' schools proved more difficult due to stricter cultural and ethical considerations. Despite these hurdles, researchers managed to observe each class four times, though ultimately, only a single lesson was observed in girls' schools to respect these constraints. Ary et al. (2018) have noted that the primary limitation of this method is its intrusive nature.

Data Collection Procedure

All conversations were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis, with interviews ranging from ten minutes to thirty minutes. Initial interviews were conducted with teacher directors, which informed the development of subsequent interviews for other groups. After interviews, classroom observations were conducted, with each participating teacher observed during one comprehensive lesson. Post-interview, one student per class was interviewed to compare their views with those of their teachers. Finally, ten parents were interviewed. Parents were selected based on a combination of involvement in their child's education and demographic factors such as the age and gender of their children. This approach was taken to ensure a broad representation of perspectives within the study.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis began immediately after the initial interviews and classroom observations were completed. The process involved open coding, where researchers thoroughly reviewed the transcriptions to identify key concepts and categories related to the CLT-based curriculum reform. This stage involved examining a wide range of social, institutional, cultural, personal, and professional factors influencing the reform. Next, axial coding was applied to refine these initial codes and identify core categories that explained the main themes.

Results

This section reports the main themes derived from various sources of data in this study, using grounded theory and interpreted through the lens of activity theory in order to show the potential contradictions between different components of the activity system under study, that is, English education in Iranian senior high schools.

Issues Related to Teachers

Three primary obstacles were identified: the contradiction between teachers' expressed preference for communicative activities and their reliance on traditional methods, varied teaching objectives coupled with ineffective communication, and inadequate compensation affecting teachers' commitment.

Although teachers acknowledged the importance of communicative activities in engaging learners, they often defaulted to traditional methods such as grammar-translation. For instance, one observation highlighted that:

The teacher focused on reading and asked learners to repeat after him and then translate sentences.

This disconnect may stem from teachers' familiarity with conventional methods rooted in their own educational experiences, as many Iranian teachers were trained through traditional approaches. The persistence of these methods suggests that while teachers theoretically support CLT, they struggle to translate this into practice due to ingrained habits and possibly insufficient training in communicative techniques.

The inconsistency between teachers' preferences and their classroom practices also often relates to their own language proficiency. Some teachers, particularly those with weaker skills in speaking and listening, admitted to prioritizing reading and writing in their instruction. One teacher noted:

I'm not really good at speaking or listening, so I tend to teach reading and writing.

This issue was mirrored in students' observations, as they reported that teachers frequently mispronounced words and relied heavily on translation rather than fostering authentic language use. This lack of proficiency undermines the communicative goals of CLT, where effective interaction is crucial.

Another significant barrier was the lack of meaningful interaction, as teachers often resorted to closed questions that limited students' opportunities to engage in authentic dialogue. For example, a student mentioned:

Most questions are answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' without genuine discussion.

This approach fails to promote the communicative competence that CLT aims to develop, instead reinforcing a more passive learning environment. Additionally, teachers expressed feeling unprepared to adopt CLT due to insufficient training, which highlights the need for targeted professional development that goes beyond theoretical instruction to include practical, hands-on training.

Financial challenges further compounded these issues, as inadequate compensation forced many teachers to take on additional jobs, detracting from their focus on teaching. One teacher explained:

I have to take on a second job to make ends meet, so I prioritize financial necessity over investing time in teaching.

This economic pressure likely reduces teachers' availability and energy to engage with new teaching methods or invest in professional growth, thereby hindering the successful implementation of CLT.

Lastly, professional development opportunities were identified as inadequate, with many teachers attending in-service programs primarily for promotional purposes rather than genuine skill development. These programs often lacked practical components, limiting their effectiveness in equipping teachers with the necessary skills to implement CLT. Moreover, teachers expressed uncertainty about integrating technology into their teaching, often perceiving it as a completely new approach rather than a tool to enhance their existing practices. This reflects a broader hesitation to innovate without sufficient support and training.

Overall, these findings underscore the complex interplay of factors that hinder the effective adoption of CLT in Iranian high schools. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving teacher training, aligning professional development with practical needs, and addressing systemic issues such as financial compensation and resource availability. By enhancing support for teachers, there is potential to bridge the gap between the communicative goals of the curriculum and the reality of classroom practice.

Issue Related to Students

While holding interviews with students, the researchers learned that there were four obstacles, namely demotivation, learners' overdependence, limited opportunities outside of class, and heteronomous classes.

A recurring issue among students was a lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English, particularly in the classroom setting. One student commented:

I am not really into learning English, especially at school; I think that it has to do with the teacher. I'm not just motivated.

This sentiment suggests that the relationship between students and their teachers plays a crucial role in student engagement. The demotivation appears to stem from a disconnect between the instructional methods used and the students' interests and goals.

Furthermore, a teacher noted that the importance of English has diminished in the eyes of students since it is no longer a significant component of the University Entrance Exam (UEE). The teacher observed:

English used to be a bit important for learners because it was part of the UEE, but now their only purpose is to get grades to keep the GPA up. To be honest, students are usually score-oriented.

This highlights how external pressures, such as exam structures, can shift students' focus from learning for mastery to learning for grades, exacerbating the issue of demotivation.

This demotivation contributes to the second obstacle—insufficient exposure to the language outside of class. Students prioritize subjects that are heavily weighted in the UEE, like mathematics and sciences, at the expense of English. As one student stated: *I cannot put time into learning English because other subjects like mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics demand more attention. In the end, I have to participate in UEE next year, so there will be no time.*

This suggests that the heavy emphasis on exam preparation leaves little room for language practice, a critical component of language acquisition. Additionally, a parent noted that their child believed their grammar knowledge was sufficient, neglecting the need for practical language use. One parent commented:

My son often says that he knows all about grammar, and that would be enough. He rarely dedicates time and energy into learning.

This indicates a potential misunderstanding of language learning, where the focus remains on grammar rather than communicative competence. The over-reliance on teachers and prescribed materials emerged as another significant challenge. Students often demonstrated a lack of autonomy in their learning processes. A student stated: *It never occurred to me to ask a question about learning that is not included in the textbook. I have never wanted to self-study another book as a supplementary source.*

This reflects a broader issue of over-dependence on structured learning environments, limiting students' ability to explore the language independently. A teacher echoed this concern:

Students do not refer to me to know more about other books about learning. They stick with what the curriculum advises. This will affect their study hours, which makes them have quite shorter study hours.

This highlights the need for fostering a more autonomous learning environment where students are encouraged to take initiative.

Finally, the heteronomous nature of classes, where students of varying proficiency levels are grouped together, poses significant challenges. This can hinder both high-achieving students and those who require more support as teachers struggle to address the diverse needs within a single classroom setting. While not explicitly quoted in the initial text, it is implied that this issue contributes to the overall difficulty in achieving effective language instruction.

Issues Related to Logistics

The third category of challenges the researchers identified pertains to logistical issues, which include overcrowded classrooms, the utilization of educational facilities, time constraints, and class frequency. These logistical challenges partly impacted the effectiveness of English language instruction.

One of the most pressing logistical issues was the size and heterogeneity of classes. Both teachers and students reported overcrowded classrooms as a major obstacle to effective learning. For instance, a student noted:

There are about 35 students in my class, which makes it pretty crowded.

This overcrowding limits the ability of teachers to provide individual attention and tailored instruction, a sentiment echoed by a teacher who observed:

There are about 37 students in a classroom; to be able to teach and assess each of them effectively is a difficult task.

The diversity in students' proficiency levels within these large classes further complicated the teaching process. As one teacher pointed out:

There are learners who are both weak and proficient. It makes it very difficult for me to get everyone involved in learning.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that teachers often struggle to balance the needs of different learners, with some teachers focusing more on higher-level students at the expense of those who are struggling. For instance, a student mentioned:

The teacher usually devotes his attention to higher-level learners in the class, who are about 3 or 4 people.

This situation reflects a broader issue where the needs of less proficient learners may be neglected, potentially widening the achievement gap within the classroom.

Another significant logistical issue is the lack of educational materials and facilities. This deficiency was particularly pronounced in public schools, where resources are often limited. As one principal observed:

I have witnessed that teachers don't use educational materials very much. I believe this is due to inadequate infrastructure, where facilities are not properly installed or are completely absent.

This lack of resources not only hinders teachers' ability to deliver engaging and effective lessons but also impacts students' learning experiences, especially in a subject like English, where access to multimedia resources can enhance language acquisition.

Time constraints and the frequency of classes also emerged as critical issues. Teachers expressed frustration over the limited class time, which restricts their ability to cover all necessary content. As one teacher explained:

Teaching grammar and reading through requires more than ninety minutes; I can barely manage these two aspects in the classroom, let alone having students roleplay or have a conversation.

This limited time, coupled with the reduction in class frequency from two sessions per week to one, exacerbates the challenge, leaving little room for activities that promote communicative competence. This time pressure forces teachers to prioritize certain aspects of the curriculum, often at the expense of more interactive and communicative exercises, which are crucial for language learning.

Issues Related to Books and Teaching Materials

Our interviews revealed that some students were not satisfied with the textbook and other teaching materials. The researchers categorized them in three separate groups: (1) the quality and the attractiveness of the book, (2) the interactivity of the content, and (3) the representation of different cultures.

A significant issue was the perceived low quality and lack of attractiveness of the textbooks. A parent remarked:

I believe what is introduced in the book is not harmonious. There are pictures in the book, but I think that's not enough.

This sentiment was echoed by students, with one saying:

I can't connect with the book. The pictures and the topics are not very interesting.

Another learner made a telling comparison:

The books we have at school have conversations similar to a translation from Persian to English. But the textbook the institute gave me includes a lot of high-quality pictures and attractive topics.

These excerpts highlight a critical gap between student expectations and the content provided by the textbooks. The students' inability to connect with the materials suggests

that the textbooks fail to engage them, which is essential for effective learning. The comparison made by one student between the school textbook and the institute's materials underscores the importance of visually appealing and contextually relevant content in fostering engagement. This gap may contribute to the overall dissatisfaction with the educational materials provided in public schools, which are often seen as inferior to those used in private language institutes.

Teachers also pointed out the lack of interactive content in the textbooks, which limits opportunities for communicative practice. As one teacher observed:

The exercises and tasks in the textbooks are not communicative. There are very few prompts in relation to each task.

This observation points to a significant shortfall in the textbooks, as interactive tasks are crucial for developing communicative competence in language learners. The lack of interactivity may result in a more passive learning experience, preventing students from actively engaging with the material and with each other, which is vital for language acquisition.

The final category of concern was the cultural content of the textbooks. One student commented:

I don't feel like reading when I open the book. The book mostly deals with religious topics.

Similarly, a teacher noted:

Unfortunately, the lack of target culture can be felt throughout the book, which is a shame. I personally believe that culture and language should go hand in hand.

These excerpts highlight a significant gap in the cultural content provided by the textbooks. The predominance of religious and local cultural content at the expense of broader cultural perspectives limits students' exposure to the global contexts in which English is used. This limitation can hinder their ability to fully understand and engage with the language, as language learning is inherently tied to cultural context.

Issues Related to Assessment

Our analysis revealed a disconnect between the curriculum's communicative goals and the assessment practices in place. Exams are primarily multiple-choice or gap-fill questions, focusing on rote memorization rather than communicative competence. These exams, along with exam preparation sessions provided by organizations like Gaj, Mobtakeran, and Qalamchi, are geared toward success in the UEE. Consequently, the emphasis is on test performance rather than the practical use of English, leading to an assessment approach that contradicts the intended communicative objectives.

One learner pointed out the non-communicative nature of exams in the interview the researchers conducted. She said:

The exams my classmates and I take, involve translation, usually from English to Persian. There are also times that we are given blanks that should be filled with the correct spelling.

Among aural skills, the researchers discovered that the listening skill was tested either through multiple-choice questions or fill-in-the-blanks. One student commented on the format:

When we take midterm exams, there are usually two questions about listening. There are some sentences that have blanks. When the teacher plays the audio files, we need to write down the missing words. But speaking is not tested.

Similarly, one teacher attested to the fact that the exams he gives are non-communicative. *I like to have students read the text randomly during each session. It prompts them to prepare by reviewing the material beforehand. This allows me to assess their comprehension and level of engagement. I also test their spelling during written exams.*

The findings indicate that the challenge is not limited to the non-communicative nature of assessments; rather, these educators prioritize evaluation over instructional practices in some respects. In other words, this situation exemplifies the negative washback effect of language assessment, where testing practices significantly influence and potentially constrain teaching methodologies.

Through our discussion with the teachers, the researchers understood that they prioritized exam preparation over adopting communicative competence. This was usually due to the exam format, which is prevalent nationwide. Our observation proved this:

First, the teacher wrote a sentence on the board and asked students to point out the 'subject.' Then he asked them to identify the sentence as passive or active. After that, he introduced the concept of 'object' and wrote several examples on the board. Next, he prompted them to determine the tense and time of the sentences. Finally, whatever the answer was, he would ask them to reconsider to make sure they had any doubts or not.

Issues Related to Cooperation

Our interviews with teacher directors and teachers uncovered that cooperation is almost absent among teachers. This category includes three issues: cooperation among teachers, cooperation among students, and the fact that teachers cannot voice their opinions.

One of the most striking issues was the absence of cooperation among teachers. A teacher director observed:

I haven't witnessed any cooperation among teachers. I believe this is mainly due to competition, which makes them reluctant to participate in group activities.

This insight suggests that competition among teachers might be undermining collaboration, leading to a fragmented professional environment. Another teacher expressed concern that seeking help could be perceived negatively:

If I ask a question from a colleague of mine, it would make me look bad because, to others, I would seem incompetent.

This comment highlights a significant barrier to collaboration, where the fear of appearing less competent discourages teachers from engaging with their peers.

These remarks can be interpreted as a reflection of the cultural and institutional norms that shape teachers' actions. The competitive atmosphere within the school environment creates a sociocultural context where individual success is prioritized over collective improvement, limiting opportunities for collaborative professional development.

Heterogeneity among students was identified as a potential asset that is currently underutilized. A student noted:

I have a few classmates who are really good at English. This makes them get the attention of teachers. But most of my classmates are average or below. The problem is that I cannot be in the same group with someone who is better than me.

This comment reveals the challenges students face in collaborating with peers of varying skill levels. Teachers also recognized this issue, one of whom remarked:

I think the lack of cooperation is mainly due to the competition among them. Each learner aims to perform better than the rest and be the best. When I ask them to team up with one another, they usually hesitate to do so, especially those who are better.

The absence of cooperation among students can be understood through the lens of activity theory as a consequence of the competitive culture that pervades both teacher and student interactions. The competitive dynamic discourages collaborative learning, which is crucial for maximizing the educational benefits of heterogeneous classrooms. The teachers' inability to harness this diversity reflects a missed opportunity to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where students can learn from each other's strengths.

The third issue relates to some teachers feeling unable to voice their opinions, particularly regarding curriculum changes. One teacher expressed frustration:

I know my students, and I know what they need. I should be able to make some changes to better suit their needs. But unfortunately, the teacher director often disagrees with what I have to say.

This comment underscores a significant disconnect between teachers' understanding of their students' needs and their ability to influence the curriculum. The lack of autonomy and voice within the institutional framework can lead to disengagement and a sense of powerlessness among teachers, which ultimately affects their motivation and effectiveness in the classroom.

This issue reflects a broader systemic problem where the hierarchical structure of the school limits teachers' agency and professional autonomy. The centralization of decision-making processes restricts the ability of teachers to adapt the curriculum to better serve their students, leading to a misalignment between educational goals and classroom practices.

Discussion

This discussion section aims to provide answers to our research questions by examining the key findings of our study. The researchers analyzed the contradictions and challenges that emerged in the implementation of the CLT approach, focusing on issues faced by teachers and learners, logistical challenges, problems with teaching materials, and difficulties in assessment and cooperation.

The teachers interviewed expressed a preference for communicative teaching but often relied on traditional methods like grammar-translation. This inconsistency may be linked to 'teacher identity,' which Bukor (2014) describes as a complex mix of personal and professional factors shaped by life experiences, influencing pedagogical choices. Since many Iranian language teachers were trained through traditional methods, it is natural for them to use similar approaches in their teaching. In addition, the concept of 'the apprenticeship of observation,' put forward by Lortie (2002), emphasizes the major role of previous learning and teaching experiences in shaping the pedagogical practices of language teachers. That is, this formative 'apprenticeship' has a significant effect on future teachers' expectations and preconceptions. However, this study's findings are limited by the small sample size and the use of convenience sampling, which may affect the validity and representativeness of the results.

The gap between teachers' preferences and practices also highlights the issue of teacher proficiency. Consistent with Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015), the researchers found that teachers with limited proficiency struggled to implement CLT. Shulman (1986)

emphasized that effective teaching requires comprehensive knowledge, including pedagogy, curriculum, and learner needs. Faez (2011) noted that language teachers play a key role in shaping learners' understanding and competence. For CLT to succeed, teachers need strong English skills; otherwise, meaningful interaction and authentic communication in L2 are compromised, posing a major obstacle to CLT implementation (Chishipula, 2016; Nunan, 1987; Thornbury, 2016).

Low teacher wages and salaries exacerbate challenges in the education sector, often leading teachers to seek additional income through side professions. Multiple studies have established a link between compensation and job satisfaction (e.g., Muguongo et al., 2015; Ramli, 2018; Rinny et al., 2020). The financial aspect significantly impacts job satisfaction (e.g., Achoka et al., 2013; Khaliq, 2018; Nazir et al., 2013; Sharma & Bajpai, 2011). This aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1987), which emphasizes the prioritization of basic physiological needs, including financial stability. However, the study's outcome may be influenced by external factors such as educational policies.

In addition to teachers' challenges, there were issues that emerged regarding learners, particularly their motivation. This issue is prevalent in educational contexts across the world, as examined by Ford and Roby (2013), Rajae Harandi (2015), and Tokan and Imakulata (2019). Our observations indicate that most students were passive, which was mainly due to teacher-centered classrooms. For learning to happen, various motivating factors are critical to initiating and sustaining learners' development. 'Self-Determination Theory', introduced by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2012), suggests that different types of motivation, such as intrinsic and extrinsic, can affect one's behavior. As a result, how engaged or passive the individuals are basically depends on how motivated they are.

Another challenge closely related to the demotivation of learners was their overdependence. Our finding is in line with Alrabai (2017), who found out that learners are overdependent on teachers for directions and guidance. Previous research indicates a strong relationship between motivation and autonomy, where motivation is a key factor in fostering learners' autonomy (e.g., Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Koçak, 2003; Spratt et al., 2002). This can be further explained by the conceptual link between autonomy and motivation, as discussed by Dickinson (1995) and Ushioda (1996), who argue that both autonomy and motivation are fundamentally concerned with the learner's active engagement and responsibility in the learning process. Specifically, Ushioda (1996) points out that while autonomy involves taking charge of all aspects of learning, self-motivation relates to managing the affective dimension of this process. This intimate

connection suggests that a learner's willingness (motivation) and their ability to self-regulate (autonomy) are intertwined, reflecting the integration of 'will and skill' in self-regulated learning theories (McCombs & Marzano, 1990).

The third issue, the lack of opportunities for learning outside the classroom, stems from the effects of demotivation and over-dependence. Students reported insufficient time and opportunity to engage in English learning beyond the classroom, echoing Cheung's (2023) findings that autonomous learners, who set goals and use metacognitive strategies, are more active in informal learning. The absence of outside-of-class opportunities is linked to students' overdependence on structured learning and a lack of motivation. According to Little (1995) and Pearson (2004), successful learners are those who take charge of their own learning and are highly motivated, which drives their participation in extracurricular activities—qualities largely missing among the students in this study.

Logistical challenges, particularly overcrowded classrooms, significantly hindered effective interaction between learners and teachers, as noted in studies by Anani Sarab et al. (2016) and Razmjoo and Barabadi (2015). This finding aligns with Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) research, which demonstrated that the nature and extent of a learner's interaction with peers and academic members influence their academic success. Additionally, studies by Arias and Walker (2004) and Beattie and Thiele (2016) support the positive impact of smaller class sizes on student performance. Dishion and Dodge's (2005) ecological framework further explains that larger class sizes may increase negative peer influence, as students often mimic the behavior of their classmates.

The teachers identified limited class time and infrequent sessions as significant logistical challenges. Previous researchers maintained that this issue was prevalent in other parts of the world. For example, a study conducted by Ariatna (2016) showed that Indonesian teachers experienced the very same difficulty when they aimed to implement a communicative approach. Ebiere Dorgu (2015) suggests that for communicative activities, including role playing and group work, longer class hours are needed. It stands to reason that lectures are generally considered necessary at school. However, when there is a high workload, class time and frequency prove to be significant adversaries. As a result, even if teachers are skilled and competent, the researchers believe that a combination of limited class time and huge class sizes makes it almost impossible to implement CLT.

While logistical issues are important, high-quality textbooks can be a valuable asset for effective teaching and learning. Cunningsworth (1995) highlights several roles that a

well-designed textbook can fulfill: delivering content, fostering student creativity, serving as a reference, and providing much-needed assistance to inexperienced teachers. The learners in our study mentioned that the textbook does not motivate them to flip through the pages since it has monotonous subjects and illustrations. Meanwhile, the teachers mentioned that the CLT approach cannot be applied because there are parts of books that are not designed to be employed as communicative and task-based exercises. What the researchers discovered was consistent with Pasand and Ghasemi's (2018) research study. They revealed that the representation of cultural topics in the series is rather narrow, with limited coverage of intercultural elements, predominantly focusing on local matters. This lack of cultural diversity can hinder the implementation of communicative tasks that are essential for CLT and TBLT. In CLT, meaningful communication is emphasized, often requiring contexts that resonate with real-world or culturally diverse scenarios. TBLT relies on engaging students through tasks that reflect authentic language use, which includes intercultural exchanges. Therefore, textbooks that predominantly feature local culture without broader intercultural contexts can restrict both the variety and the authenticity of communicative tasks.

Parents in our study reported that they often enroll their children in private language institutes for English education, as they believe these institutions better meet communicative goals than public schools. This finding aligns with Asadi et al. (2016), who noted that many Iranian students turn to private institutions due to the inadequacies of formal education in teaching communicative English. Private institutes are seen as superior because they use modern teaching methods and culturally diverse textbooks, whereas public schools rely on more traditional, localized approaches (Asadi et al., 2016; Borjian, 2013).

Language teachers in our study noted that the textbooks lacked a communicative design, echoing Ahour et al. (2014), who found that these materials largely ignored listening, speaking, and writing skills. Teachers also highlighted the absence of cultural diversity in the textbooks, making it challenging for learners to develop intercultural competence. This aligns with Asadi et al. (2016), who reported widespread dissatisfaction among teachers regarding the limited cultural content. Many researchers, such as Chastain (1988) and McGrath (2002), argue that integrating culture is essential in language teaching. Additionally, parents and learners found the textbooks unattractive, which López (2023) suggests can hinder their ability to capture students' attention.

Two major issues emerged regarding the use of technology in teaching. First, some teachers believed that incorporating technology required them to adopt entirely new

teaching methods. Second, despite the need for extensive exposure to language learning, teachers often fail to encourage students to use technology for self-directed learning outside of school. This reluctance stemmed from unfamiliarity with technological resources and uncertainty about their effective use. However, it is important to note that technology itself does not inherently improve the curriculum; its effectiveness depends on how it is integrated into educational goals (Blake & Guillén, 2020).

In Iran's education system, both school authorities and families place significant importance on standardized exams, which emphasize reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar rather than communicative skills. This exam-focused approach, known as the "washback" effect, shapes classroom instruction to mimic exam tasks (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Our findings align with previous studies (e.g., Razmjoo & Barabadi, 2015; Taqizadeh & Birjandi, 2015) that highlight how national and local exams negatively impact the development of conversational and auditory skills, with teachers prioritizing test preparation over communicative ability (Bailey, 2018).

After interviewing teachers and teacher directors, it became evident that teacher collaboration was nearly nonexistent in the school environment, largely due to "teacher isolation" (Lortie, 2002). This concept includes three types: physical isolation (teachers working separately in their classrooms), psychological isolation (resistance to interaction with colleagues), and adaptive isolation (stress from new responsibilities). Our study suggests that the teachers primarily experienced psychological isolation, avoiding collaboration to prevent exposing differences in their approaches and to avoid peer judgment, thus hindering their professional development.

The final issue in the cooperation category was that teachers felt unheard, particularly by administrators. This aligns with studies emphasizing that being able to express one's ideas fosters a perception of fairness (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). When people have the opportunity to voice their concerns and participate in discussions, it promotes procedural justice, supported by Thibaut and Walker's (1975) "process control effect" and Leventhal's (1980) "representativeness" criterion, which allows for argument presentation and consideration of all affected perspectives. Research shows that having a voice in decision-making is strongly linked to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Colquitt et al., 2001; Farndale et al., 2011; Holland et al., 2011; Wood & Wall, 2007). Therefore, enabling teachers to express their concerns can create a sense of procedural justice, leading to higher job satisfaction and organizational loyalty.

Conclusion

This study investigated the implementation of CLT in Iranian senior high schools, revealing several systemic challenges that hinder the effective adoption of this approach. The findings underscored a significant gap between the intended communicative objectives of the curriculum and the entrenched traditional practices observed in classrooms. Despite recognizing the benefits of CLT, many teachers continue to rely on conventional methods such as grammar drills and rote learning, largely due to a lack of adequate training, support, and familiarity with communicative techniques. This misalignment between pedagogical intentions and classroom practices suggests that successful implementation of CLT requires more than just policy changes; it demands a holistic transformation of the educational environment.

One of the most pressing issues identified was the influence of standardized assessments, which prioritize reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar over communicative skills. The washback effect of these exams encourages teachers to focus on test-oriented teaching rather than fostering real-world language use. To address this, educational stakeholders must re-evaluate the content and structure of assessments to better align with CLT principles.

Logistical constraints such as large class sizes, limited resources, and time constraints further complicate the implementation of CLT. Overcrowded classrooms and short class durations make it challenging for teachers to engage students in interactive and communicative activities, limiting opportunities for meaningful language practice. Additionally, the lack of suitable teaching materials that reflect diverse cultures and authentic language use hinders students' ability to connect with the curriculum. Enhancing resource allocation, reducing class sizes, and adjusting timetables to allow for more interactive learning sessions are essential steps in creating a conducive environment for CLT.

The study also highlighted the need for greater cooperation among teachers, students, and parents. Teachers often felt isolated in their efforts to implement new methodologies, facing competition rather than collaboration from their peers. Similarly, students showed limited engagement in cooperative learning activities, reflecting a broader cultural hesitation toward group work. Promoting a culture of collaboration within schools, through professional learning communities and peer support networks, can empower teachers to share best practices and collectively overcome challenges.

To ensure that educational reforms achieve their intended outcomes, it is crucial to address these systemic barriers through targeted interventions. Policymakers and

curriculum developers should invest in comprehensive professional development programs that equip teachers with the skills and confidence needed to adopt CLT. Such programs should emphasize practical, hands-on training rather than theoretical knowledge, enabling teachers to experience and apply communicative techniques in a controlled setting.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of these recommended changes and examine the role of other stakeholders, such as school administrators and educational policymakers, in supporting CLT implementation. Mixed-methods approaches, including longitudinal studies, can provide deeper insights into the evolving dynamics of language teaching in Iran. Additionally, investigating the experiences of students and parents more extensively could offer valuable perspectives on how CLT is perceived and practiced outside the classroom.

In conclusion, the successful implementation of CLT in Iranian high schools requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the interconnected challenges of assessment, logistics, teaching materials, and stakeholder cooperation. By fostering a supportive environment that aligns assessment practices with communicative goals, enhancing teacher training, and promoting a collaborative school culture, the educational system can move closer to realizing the full potential of CLT. Addressing these challenges not only benefits language learners but also sets a precedent for broader educational reforms that prioritize meaningful, student-centered learning experiences.

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