

Exploring Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes toward Classroom Practices of CLT

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Abstract

This study delves into the attitudes of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners toward the classroom practices of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It endeavors to present a comprehensive understanding of the current state of CLT in Iran, the associated challenges, and potential avenues for enhancing CLT classroom practices. The existing literature review highlights a scarcity of research concerning learners' perspectives on CLT, with many studies primarily relying on questionnaires or surveys, failing to capture learners' nuanced attitudes and experiences. In response to this gap, our qualitative research explores the attitudes of 31 Iranian EFL learners using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, known for its capacity to unearth insights into social processes and their underlying factors, is particularly suited to this endeavor. The research findings uncover seven key themes that constitute the dimensions of CLT practices in the EFL classroom. These themes include interactive learning, speaking-auditory communication, learners' participation in class activities, learners' ability, teacher empowerment, learning needs assessment, and communicative language training. This study offers valuable insights into Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices. Findings also contribute to the ongoing dialogue on language teaching methodologies, providing educators and policymakers with a deeper understanding of learner perspectives and paving the way for more effective CLT implementation in EFL classrooms in Iran.

Keywords: Attitude, communicative language teaching, EFL, exploratory research, grounded theory

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INTRODUCTION

The recognition of English as an international language and its widespread use worldwide has influenced how it is instructed worldwide (Nunan, 2003). Besides, many people want to learn English for a variety of reasons, including having access to resources, doing business, finding job opportunities, and learning about different cultures. Various teaching methods have now emerged to meet these needs (Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017). Since the problems with these methods were recognized over time, they have been replaced by new ones. The literature on English Language Teaching (ELT) shows that there has been a plethora of English teaching approaches and methods developed over the past fifty years to satisfy learners' needs and wants (Richards & Renandly, 2002).

Similarly, numerous language instruction techniques have been introduced to the ELT field thus far due to the abundance and complexity of issues in language teaching and learning, including the importance of grammar in language curricula, the development of accuracy and fluency in teaching, and the role of materials and technology, to name a few (Dewi, 2019). To address the diverse demands of students, the ELT profession has also witnessed numerous methodology changes due to the shortcomings of each era's dominant teaching method (Leung, 2009). In an effort to determine the most effective technique for teaching English, various adjustments have also been made, including a wide range of tasks, resources, and teaching and learning materials (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

In reaction to discontent with the conventional approaches, communicative language teaching (CLT) emerged in the 1970s. Linguists asserted that linguistic capacity went well beyond grammatical proficiency (Richards, 2006). The CLT way of thinking quickly spread widely. It was embraced by linguists and educators everywhere, becoming the paradigm for teaching languages that still rule the planet today. The implementation of CLT in contexts for second and foreign language acquisition has faced certain difficulties, nevertheless. Nam (2023), for instance, stated that applying CLT

in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting encounters numerous difficulties, such as the lack of teacher preparation, regional learning and teaching practices, language assessments, and the lack of teacher participation in policy-making. Additionally, prior research has revealed additional barriers to the implementation of CLT, such as teachers' and students' resistance, teachers' lack of knowledge and expertise in implementing CLT, and students' low motivation and English proficiency due to a lack of teaching resources and effective assessment (e.g., Chang & Goswami, 2011; Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2005; Kustati, 2013).

Language learning is a multifaceted process that extends beyond simple instructional techniques and methodologies. One often overlooked component that significantly impacts the success of language learning is the learners' attitudes (Fakeye, 2010; Rahmani et al., 2022). Attitude is characterized by high emotional involvement, including feelings, self, and social relationships (Brown, 2000; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Mercer, 2019). Learners' attitudes in language learning are of paramount importance, as they directly influence motivation, engagement, and, ultimately, fluency and proficiency. Thus, learners' attitudes must be incorporated into language learning as they can affect learners' performance and contribute to acquiring the target language. Research suggests that the lack of attention given to learners' attitudes toward language learning can hinder their overall progress and negatively impact their motivation and success (Al Rifai, 2010). As such, exploring learners' attitudes toward language learning processes and practices can help educators and teachers identify challenges, use materials more effectively, and implement the techniques that best suit learners' attitudes and needs.

Despite the fact that previous studies have provided valuable information on the evaluation of CLT textbooks in the Iranian EFL context (e.g., Goodarzi et al., 2020; Rashidi & Kehtarfard, 2014), CLT practices of teachers (Firoozi et al., 2019; Kardous & Saeedian, 2021), and attitudes of teachers and students about CLT (Anani Sarab et al., 2016; Jafari et al., 2015; Khatib & Tootkaboni, 2019; Taebi et al., 2016; Tarlaniabadi, 2022; Tootkaboni,

2019), few studies have investigated the issue through an in-depth qualitative exploration of the learners' attitudes. Hence, the present study is an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward classroom practices of CLT.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CLT has gained prominence in the field of English language education, emphasizing communication and interaction as central elements of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The present study aims to explore the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards classroom practices of CLT. Understanding these attitudes is crucial as it can inform EFL educators and policymakers about the effectiveness and reception of CLT in Iranian EFL classrooms.

The Iranian ELT Context

To contextualize the study, it is essential to consider the historical development of EFL teaching in Iran. English has become a significant foreign language in Iran due to its global importance, leading to a growing demand for English language education. At present, the main objective of English language education in secondary schools indicated in Iran's Reformed National Curriculum is to assist the learners to appreciate and transmit individual's cultural heritage by means of various linguistic forms such as visual, oral, and written. Likewise, as stated by Kheirabadi and Alavimoghaddam (2016), it attempts to zoom on communicative competence and problem-solving skills by attaining all language skills instantaneously. The suggested methodology in the post-reform period is a local CLT, where the main focus is on enabling learners to understand and use the English language, and also to convey localized cultural and ideological values.

Historically, traditional grammar-translation methods dominated EFL classrooms in Iran (Afshari & Ketabi, 2017). However, with the advent of CLT and the recent reform, the teaching methodology landscape began to

change. CLT, as a pedagogical approach, emphasizes the use of language for real communication, focusing on the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It encourages learner-centered activities, group work, and meaningful interaction in the classroom. These principles can enhance learners' communication skills and overall proficiency in English (Borg, 2015). Despite the potential benefits of CLT, there are challenges and concerns in its implementation in Iranian EFL contexts, which is the context of the present study. Limited resources, large class sizes, and the influence of national exams that prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence can hinder the adoption of CLT (Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2016). It is essential to acknowledge these challenges when exploring learners' attitudes.

Literature on Attitudes toward CLT

Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward CLT have been a subject of interest in recent years. Studies suggest that while many learners may initially resist CLT due to its deviation from traditional methods, their attitudes tend to become more positive over time (Rahim & Naderi, 2014). Factors such as teachers' competence in implementing CLT, learners' perceptions of their language progress, and classroom dynamics can influence these attitudes (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). A look at the literature indicates that many studies have addressed English teachers' and learners' attitudes toward CLT (e.g., Khatib & Tootkaboni, 2018; Mirzaee, 2016). However, despite their valuable insights, these studies were conducted with some drawbacks and shortcomings, such as using a small sample size and the failure to use a comprehensive attitude measurement instrument (Chang, 2000; Kalanzadeh et al., 2013). Moreover, some studies have reported conflicting results on CLT practices. While most studies presented evidence showing learners' support for communicative activities, some authors have demonstrated the learners' preferences for non-communicative activities in EFL contexts as well (İnceçay & İnceçay, 2009; Rao, 2002). In addition, most studies have

used various tools to measure learners' attitudes, including questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and direct observations (Karim, 2004; Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010). Thus, there is a need for a more unified, consistent instrument to be used for measuring EFL learners' attitudes toward CLT practices.

Understanding Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward classroom practices of CLT is vital for the ongoing improvement of English language education in Iran. While challenges exist, research suggests that learners' attitudes can become more positive as they experience the benefits of CLT in their language learning journey. This study contributes to the broader conversation on CLT implementation and its reception in diverse educational contexts.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To provide a clear picture of the current status of CLT in Iran and related challenges and problems, and also gain a deeper insight into the classroom practices of CLT, this article aims to delve into the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards the classroom practices of CLT. A review of the literature indicates that few studies have addressed learners' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices. Besides, most studies employed either a questionnaire as the main instrument to collect data or survey techniques to explore learners' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices (Khatib & Tootkaboni, 2019; Mirzaee, 2016; Mowlaie & Rahimi, 2010; Vaezi & Abbaspour, 2014). While the findings of these studies are significant, they have failed to qualitatively capture learners' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices. To fill this gap, the present study qualitatively explored Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices. More specifically, using an exploratory study (Creswell & Hanson, 2007), the main themes related to classroom practices of CLT were generated. Overall, the present study sought to find the answer to the following research question: What are Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward classroom practices of CLT?

METHOD

Participants

A qualitative research design, known as a grounded-theory study, was used to discover Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward classroom practices of CLT. This type of qualitative research helps develop a theory or model regarding a specific phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The study's sample was selected through criterion-based sampling. This type of sampling method is used when researchers intentionally select individuals to explore the central phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The criteria for selecting the participants were: (1) enrollment in CLT vs. other programs, (2) studying English for at least three years, and (3) age range of 15 to 35. Rather than determining a specific number of interviewees, the data collection process continued until the data reached the theoretical saturation, namely, the point at which each recent qualitative interview would reproduce only previously discovered data. To achieve this, the data collection process involved conducting in-depth interviews with participants selected through criterion-based sampling. After each interview, the transcripts were carefully analyzed, and emerging themes were identified. This iterative process of data collection and analysis continued until redundancy in the themes became evident, indicating that no new insights were being gained from additional interviews. The sample included 31 intermediate to advanced EFL learners who were admitted to the English language programs implemented by the CLT tenets in the language institutes in Khoy, Iran. They were taking classes during the winter 2020 semester.

As Table 1 shows, the participants included 10 males and 21 females, nine of whom were between 15 and 25 years old. Moreover, three participants had middle or high school diplomas, one held an associate degree, and sixteen had postgraduate degrees. Twenty-three studied in public schools, while eight attended private schools.

To comply with the ethical guidelines, all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.. The confidentiality of their identities was

maintained throughout the study through the use of anonymized data. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Measures were also taken to minimize any potential harm or discomfort.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	10	%32
	Female	21	%68
Age	Less than 15 years	0	0
	15-25 years	9	%29
	25-35 years	12	%39
	More than 35 years	10	%32
Education Level	Less than a diploma	3	%9
	Diploma and associate degree	1	%3
	Bachelor	11	%35
	Master's degree ^ش	16	%53
School Type	Public	23	%74
	Private	8	%26
Total		31	%100

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers and conducted to elicit Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward classroom practices of CLT. Each interview began with questions about the participant's gender, age, and the type of school (governmental or non-governmental) in which they were studying. The interview guide consisted of a series of open-ended and retrospective questions.

In order to ensure the reliability of the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews, several measures were implemented. Firstly, the interview guide was carefully designed and piloted with a small sample of participants to assess its clarity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness for

capturing the intended data. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the interview questions and ensure their reliability in eliciting meaningful responses. The interviewer received specific training on conducting semi-structured interviews, including techniques for establishing rapport with participants, maintaining neutrality, and probing for detailed responses without leading the conversation. Additionally, regular debriefing sessions were held among the research team to discuss any emerging issues or challenges encountered during the interviews and to ensure consistency in approach across all participants.

Regarding the content of the interviews, the interview guide was developed following a thorough review of the relevant literature on CLT practices and Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards them. The questions were designed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences regarding various aspects of CLT classroom practices, including the role of grammar, learner and teacher roles, error correction and evaluation, group and pair work dynamics, and the role of the native language in the CLT context.

To validate the content of the interviews, a panel of experts in the field of language teaching and research reviewed the interview guide for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. The criteria used for this review included alignment with established principles of CLT, appropriateness for the target participant group, and potential to generate rich and insightful data. Feedback from the expert panel was incorporated into the final version of the interview guide to ensure its effectiveness in capturing participants' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices.

Data Collection Procedure

In-depth interviews with the participants were conducted by one of the researchers at the language institute where the research was carried out, in order to obtain the necessary qualitative data for this study. The institute was selected from among the language institutes of Khoy according to the criteria mentioned above. There was no language limitation for the participants when

answering the interview questions. That is, due to the wide range of participants' education levels, which might affect their ability to express their views, they were allowed to answer the interview questions in either English or Persian, as they wished. Each interview lasted between thirty to forty minutes. The interviews were recorded, and key points mentioned by the interviewees were noted during the interview process. To analyze the participants' attitudes toward CLT, the researchers coded partial transcripts of the interview data to identify the main themes and address the research question. Considering the data transcription method, Dörnyei (2007) contends that partial transcription can be advantageous for qualitative researchers, i.e., transcribing the parts that align with the study's objectives. Accordingly, the researchers focused on selected snippets of the interview data that corresponded to the main themes identified.

Data Analysis Procedure

The specific steps of the qualitative thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were carried out as follows.

Get to Know Our Data

When starting the thematic analysis, researchers immerse themselves in the data so that they become thoroughly familiar with its depth and richness. Data immersion requires frequent reading and active review. In this process, while reading the text, certain ideas and patterns are recognized.

Generating Preliminary Codes and Coding

Step two begins when the researcher has studied and familiarized himself with the data, and has prepared a preliminary list of ideas derived from the data and their notable features. Therefore, this step requires generating preliminary codes from the data content. In this step, codes are used to divide the textual data into understandable and usable parts, such as clauses, phrases, words, or other criteria necessary for specific analysis.

Searching and Understanding Themes

This step focuses on the analysis at a level higher than codes, in which different codes are arranged into themes, and all coded data related to each theme are identified and collected.

Reviewing Themes

Step four begins once a set of themes is devised and requires refinement. Known themes are the main source of the theme networks. In this step, it will become clear that some proposed themes are not genuine themes (for example, if there is not enough data or if the data is too diverse), some themes overlap with each other (for example, if two separate themes share the same meaning and concept, together forming a single theme), and others may need to be divided into separate themes. Internal homogeneity and heterogeneity can be applied here to evaluate the themes.

Analyzing the Network of Themes

Step five begins when the researcher reaches a network of satisfactory themes. At this stage, the researcher can define and adjust the proposed themes for data analysis and then analyze the data accordingly. In this step, the theme networks are drawn, examined, and analyzed. Theme networks are an analytical tool, not the analysis itself. They help the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the meanings within the texts, describe the themes, and identify their patterns.

To ensure the credibility of qualitative data, several steps were taken. To preserve the accuracy of the participants' verbal accounts of their experiences, the interviewer (the first author) recorded the participants' statements during the interviews (with the participants' permission). During the interviews, the interviewer took notes and then shared them with each interviewee. The interviewees participated in a member-checking process, in which they were invited to review the interview transcripts to correct any

inaccuracies and confirm that the interviewer had accurately represented their experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The interviewer then checked and refined the data with at least two researchers trained in qualitative research. This step was undertaken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis by leveraging the expertise of multiple researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By involving additional researchers in the analysis process, diverse perspectives were incorporated, thereby enhancing the credibility and rigor of the study's findings.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were used to establish the rigor of the study. To this end, participants were chosen to represent a wide variance in age and English proficiency, which was checked through a placement test administered by the language institute, and intermediate- to advanced-level participants were included to ensure the credibility of the results. Both participants and experts engaged in peer and member checking to confirm the data. The method used to gather and evaluate the data was documented and discussed in detail in order to improve the dependability (consistency) of the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the interviews were recorded, and every step taken to conduct the study was described in full detail so that potential readers could evaluate the research technique as needed, thereby ensuring the veracity of the findings. Two EFL instructors reviewed the information and the conclusions to enhance their transferability. To further ensure the reliability of the data analysis, inter-coder agreement was assessed between two EFL instructors who independently reviewed the information and conclusions. The level of agreement between the coders was measured using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which was 0.72, indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

RESULTS

Once the phase known as data immersion was over, the coding process of the

research interviews was carried out using MAXQDA20 software. This process helped generate preliminary codes and arrange them into themes. By identifying and separating the themes, the researchers were able to refine overlapping ones. Finally, the researchers obtained a network of themes that accounted for the participants' attitudes toward CLT classroom practices. Each main theme is subdivided into sub-themes, as presented in Table 2, along with examples.

Table 2: Main and Sub-Themes and their Frequency

Main theme	Sub-theme	An example of the concept mentioned in the interview texts	Frequency
Interactive learning	1. Increasing learning opportunities	It has provided the students with the opportunity to learn together with creativity and action. (Interview 28, code 5) A friendly atmosphere and two-way interaction between students significantly help to improve learning. (Interview 29, Code 6)	3
	2. Information transfer	When we interact in our class, I feel it is easier to transfer information, and I enjoy the class and learning more. (Interview 6, Code 2)	2
	3. In-class and out-of-class interactions	We always practice English together, and our teacher emphasizes in-class and even out-of-class interactions (Interview 2, code 23).	2
	4. Receiving feedback from learners' interactions	When we ask students to talk about a topic in pairs and in groups, and then we get feedback on what they heard from their peers, we help them learn through conversation and communication with each other. (Interview 3, Code 13)	4
	5. Creating conditions and encouraging	In my opinion, the teacher should create comfortable, interactive conditions for	5

	interaction between learners	learners and encourage students to interact with each other. (Interview 8, Code 3)	
	6. Using new types of interactive and valid activities and topics	New types of activities and topics are used during the teaching and learning process that is interactive and authentic from different aspects (Interview 16, code 7).	2
Speaking- auditory communication	7. Listening skills	Yes, we listen to audio files and learn by imitation. (interview 2, code 11) And also reading and listening to English files (interview 30, code 6)	5
	8. Speaking skills	Oral language (listening and speaking), written language, and reading are all interconnected. Oral skills are mostly used in reading and writing. Teachers should, therefore, establish a connection between the four talents. Code 18 (Interview 1,)	4
	9. Improving fluency and mastery of speaking	However, to improve the fluency of our words, he ignores them during the interaction and corrects them at the end of the class (interview 2, code 16).	5
Learners' participation in class activities	10. Meaningful participation	Through meaningful participation, we find that we have an opportunity to learn from our communities. (Interview 1, Code 8)	9
	11. Classroom activities and opinion exchange	Our teacher always encourages students to be active in the classroom, participate in activities, and exchange ideas with the teacher and students, especially during open discussions. (Interview 2, Code 4)	5
	12. Receive understandable language data	Increasing participation by speaking activities, playing games in class, and lectures. (Interview 29, code 7)	4

	13. Encouragement of students by the teacher using cooperative strategies	According to the classroom conditions, the teacher encourages 100% of the students to engage in cooperative strategies. (Interview 23, code 7)	6
	14. Pair, group activities, role plays and discussion	It is a top priority in our English class. He gives us activities based on pair and group work, role-playing, and discussion. (Interview 2, code 14)	4
	15. Imposing no compulsion, anxiety, and stress on students	It should be indirect because forcing students to speak correctly will cause anxiety and stress. (Interview 14, Code 13)	1
Learners' ability	16. Comprehension skills	They also need to work on their comprehension and speaking skills more frequently. (Interview 4, code 4)	2
	17. Considering different learning styles of learners	In fact, there is a different academic level in the class (interview 26, code 57)	1
	18. Understanding the culture of language beyond words	Because they are learning other language concepts. We have to learn how to communicate by understanding their culture beyond words. (Interview 16, Code 23)	1
	19. Providing the necessary infrastructure and building self-confidence in learners	Yes, considering that today's generation has become familiar with the English language, this is possible. Basic infrastructure must be provided. The learners should be given the opportunity to grow and build self-confidence in them. (Interview 24, code 47)	2
	20. Help to develop the speaking ability in different situations	Different activities help to develop the ability to speak in different situations (interview 5, code 5)	2
Teacher empowerment	21. Solving the economic problems of teachers	and teachers' economic problems are solved (interview 14, code 21)	1

	22. Supporting the teaching and learning process	To regularly discuss their needs throughout the course so that I think the necessary needs to support the teaching and learning process are met by examining the results (interview 16, code 4)	2
	23. Listening to the teacher and correcting mistakes at the end of the discussion	While a student is talking or two students are talking together, even when we have group work, the teacher is just listening and taking notes. At the end of the activity, he asks other students to correct the mistakes, or he mentions them himself. (Interview 2, code 19)	5
	24. Provision of audiovisual facilities in schools and institutions	Some public institutions and schools lack audiovisual aids (Interview 24, code 4).	6
	25. Providing adequate training to teachers	Teachers must first be well trained. If there is an obstacle, this factor will be the same. (Interview 11, code 15)	1
Learning needs assessment	26. Using audio and video tools for educational purposes	Audiovisual aids are used in the classes. (Interview 15, code 4)	1
	27. Performing needs analysis to motivate learners	Learners' needs are a fundamental aspect of the analysis, which is the need to keep learners motivated. (Interview 1, code 2)	2
	28. Adapting materials to suit learner needs	And I think the book we use to learn the language is not what we really need. (Interview 4, Code 3)	2
	29. Creating opportunities to talk about interests and needs	In my opinion, if the teacher gives us the opportunity to talk about our interests and needs in the second language (interview 9, code 2)	3
	30. Considering the needs of learners by the teacher	The teacher should also consider their needs (interview 16, code 38).	1
	31. Bridging the gap between the interests and needs of learners	There are many subjects that teachers teach and students forget after the course. Why	1

			does this happen? This shows the gap between the taught material and the learners, as well as their interests and needs. (Interview 18, Code 8)	
Communicative language training	32.	Teaching communicative language forms and their use	Therefore, it can be concluded that the language is not taught as it should be in public schools based on current and standard methods. I think dialogue should be given more importance. (Interview 24, code 6)	4
	33.	Learners' satisfaction with their communicative educational activity	I think we all enjoy what we do in class, and we all learn interesting and useful things. (Interview 21, code 29)	2
	34.	Improving interpersonal communication	Communicative language training leads to better communication. (Interview 11, Code 3)	4
	35.	Implementation of communicative language teaching	Communicative language training is also applicable in our class (Interview 18, code 70)	1

As is clear, the examination and categorization of the descriptive codes led to the emergence of 37 sub-themes. Based on their similarity in meaning, they were grouped into seven main themes: interactive learning, speaking-listening communication, learners' participation in class activities, learners' ability, teacher empowerment, learning needs assessment, and communicative language training (CLT). Figure 1 presents the tree diagram generated by the MAXQDA software.

emphasizing the practice of new interactive activities. These findings are consistent with earlier empirical research (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Eisenring & Margana, 2019; Kardoust & Saeedian, 2021), which stress that learners "should be allowed to have interactions to express their opinions and beliefs" (Kardoust & Saeedian, 2021, p. 181). This emphasis on interaction among learners and between learners and teachers (Atai & Mazlum, 2013) can foster the learner's L2 development and enhance the teaching program's capability to help teachers integrate new curricula into their instruction. The notion of interaction manifested in interactive learning is a fundamental aspect of CLT, as proposed by Savignon (1987) in her seminal work on CLT. It suggests that learners engaged in interactive learning can improve their second language more effectively than the students trained in a classroom with the minimum interaction among learners or between the learner and the teacher (Eisenring & Margana, 2019).

A possible justification for this finding is that different aspects of a second/foreign language program, such as textbooks, teachers, the curriculum, and the policy agenda, have the potential to increase or at least pave the way for increasing the amount of interaction in the classroom context, which in turn helps strengthen student's learning and make them as communicative as possible. This finding can also be supported by Toro et al.'s (2019) study, which confirms that classroom-related factors, such as authentic language environment, interactional activities, and CLT provision, can affect the oral skills of EFL learners. Learning through interaction within CLT, considered significant in the EFL domain since the 1980s, has been described as "an expanding concept for a changing world" (Littlewood, 2011). From this perspective, interactive learning also affirms its importance in the conceptual model of CLT practice in the EFL classroom.

The second component affecting CLT practice in the EFL classroom, as mentioned by the interviewees, was speaking–auditory communication. It was found that some notions, including paying attention to listening skills, strengthening speaking skills, and focusing on the interaction channel, significantly impact the mastery and fluency of speech among EFL learners.

Some empirical findings in the literature are compatible with these results (e.g., Dos Santos, 2020; Firoozi et al., 2019; Rezalou & Yagiz, 2021; Toro et al., 2019; Xolmurodova, 2021). It might be stated that the key methods teachers employ to assist students in developing their communicative abilities include modeling, repetition, pair work, and group work. These techniques are often employed in CLT lessons, and they are considered effective in encouraging student engagement. It is vital to stress that, in addition to the tactics previously described, other strategies can be incorporated to provide learners with more opportunities to produce language orally. To help students develop their oral skills, teachers often offer other forms of feedback, such as elicitation and metalinguistic feedback.

The research in this area demonstrates that the above-listed elements are seen as facilitators of oral communicative skills. Consistent with the present study, Rahman et al. (2019), in the EFL context of Bangladesh, found that speaking–auditory communication can be considered CLT’s distinguishing feature. Similarly, the present study’s findings can take support from Rezalou and Yagiz’s (2021) research, confirming that the effectiveness of speaking classes in CLT is increased because students are significantly more satisfied with their speaking ability compared to other methods.

As presented in this study, the third dimension of CLT practice in the EFL classroom was learners’ participation in class activities. CLT elements pave the way for meaningful participation among learners, leading them to take part in classroom activities and exchange information with one another. Increasing participation in the class through speaking, playing games, and giving oral presentations; encouraging learners to engage in collaborative strategies; introducing pair and group activities; and reducing learners’ stress and anxiety as much as possible were all found to play important roles in influencing CLT practices in the EFL classroom.

Most of the participants in this study focused on teachers’ strategies to provide them with an atmosphere of interaction and classroom participation. They insisted that "through meaningful participation, they find that they have an opportunity to learn from their classroom." Some of them, however,

complained about the lack of speaking activities, games played in class, and lectures, which, in turn, play a significant role in increasing participation by the learner. Additionally, the learners interviewed implicitly mentioned participation in a meaningful exchange of ideas in the classroom and a move toward learner-centeredness. They pointed out that, without such measures, learners' desire to participate in classroom activities would be reduced, which may confuse EFL learners and make the L2 classroom boring. The present findings can be supported by Dos Santos's (2020) study on this ground of CLT, as within the CLT domain, "students may increase their understanding and knowledge of language use, feasibility, and communication abilities" (p. 106). It follows that CLT can potentially pique students' interest in teaching and learning more generally. Students' interests may also be nurtured outside the classroom walls by allowing them to engage in real-life stories and exercises in the CLT setting, in contrast to the Grammar-Translation Method (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004), in which they are the sole listeners to lectures. Among other studies supporting the present findings is that of Rezalou and Yagiz (2021), who reported on EFL learners' attitudes towards CLT activities in the EFL classroom, asserting that "learning through communicative activities enabled students to communicate purposefully and their attitudes were changed positively toward using these activities in the classroom" (p. 122).

The fourth component affecting CLT practices in the EFL classroom, as proposed in the conceptual model of the study, is learners' ability in which some factors such as relative mastery over comprehension skills, the use of instructional strategies based on their proficiency levels, understanding of the target language culture, high self-confidence, and the ability to speak in different situations were identified. The study participants cited these factors as positive aspects a CLT-based classroom can provide. Bakar et al.'s (2019) study aligns with the above-mentioned result, confirming that developing abilities such as comprehension skills, communication self-confidence, and speaking in different situations are often considered distinctive features of the CLT classroom. In addition, the present findings are in line with Dos Santos's

(2020), who argues that learners' communication abilities will be increased in the CLT classroom, providing them with a broader worldview to initiate effective communication whenever required.

The fifth component of CLT practice in the EFL classroom was teacher empowerment. This component highlights that (i) teachers who teach on the basis of CLT are paid more, (ii) CLT supports the teaching and learning processes, (iii) teachers' delayed corrective feedback through fine-tuning is considered a privilege, (iv) CLT teachers are provided with audiovisual facilities by schools and institutions, and (v) such teachers are provided with in-service training programs to stay updated. These findings signify what is necessary for a CLT teacher. As Rahman et al. (2018) found, both teachers' knowledge and access to classroom aids and technological facilities help them conduct more effective classes. It can therefore be argued that teaching strategies enriched through teachers' empowerment, job satisfaction, and the facilities they are provided with will strengthen the motivation to teach, ultimately leading to learner success in L2 development. The results obtained in the present study concerning teacher empowerment are in line with the findings of Haryono (2019), Hu (2002), Ozsevik (2010), Tiwari (2021), and Zulu (2019). All of these studies consider teacher empowerment and job satisfaction to be influential factors in the development of CLT practices in EFL classrooms.

The sixth factor, based on learners' perceptions, was learning needs assessment, which encompassed teachers' use of audiovisual tools in the classroom, motivating learners by analyzing their needs, selecting CLT textbooks and materials aligned with the learners' real needs, providing opportunities for learners to discuss their interests and needs, recognizing learners' needs, and focusing on learners' needs, wants, and requirements. These elements are considered fundamental aspects of CLT, as proposed by Prabhu (1987), who later developed the principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT). Accordingly, this finding is supported by both CLT and TBLT studies that emphasize the significant notion of "needs" (Akhatovna, 2023; Ju, 2013; Ozsevik, 2010; Rashidi & Kehtarfard, 2014; Willis, 1996). It

can be argued that English teaching in Iran should be better planned with respect to learners' needs. This study has shown that English is one of the core subjects in the Iranian educational context and plays a significant role in this regard. The CLT and TBLT practiced in private institutions are largely consistent with the principles proposed in the present study and those of the CLT literature in the Iranian context (Goodarzi et al., 2020; Memari, 2013; Khatib & Tootkaboni, 2019; Tarlanialiabadi, 2022; Vaezi & Abbaspour, 2014), whereas high schools in Iran lack sufficient resources to support such an extensive initiative.

Students, especially those in public schools, are typically grouped into large English classes due to the disparity between the number of students who need to study English and the number of teachers available to teach them. Thus, despite the widespread claim that high school English classes are CLT-oriented (Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2019), most classes continue to focus on the tried-and-true method of instruction, in which grammar is emphasized at the expense of more practical skills, such as listening and speaking. As a result, even after years of studying the language in a classroom setting, students still struggle to interact with native English speakers.

The seventh factor highlighted as a CLT practice in the EFL classroom was communicative language training, which referred to the learners' satisfaction with their communicative educational activities. In addition, teaching communicative language forms and their application was considered significant. This finding indicated that communicative language is not taught in public schools. These results can be argued to be in line with many previous studies (Davari et al., 2020; Firoozi et al., 2019; Goodarzi et al., 2020; Kardoust & Saeedian, 2021; Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2016) which highlight the insufficient application of CLT or its partial use in the Iranian high schools, whereas in private institutions teachers tend to be more organized in following CLT principles (Memari, 2013; Tarlanialiabadi, 2022; Vaezi & Abbaspour, 2014).

It can be argued that the CLT model proposed in the present study has taken into account different dimensions of CLT in practice, dimensions that

most of the previous studies have not addressed together in a single, multifaceted investigation. The comprehensive perspective adopted in this study also highlights the multi-dimensionality of the model, asserting that in addition to learner factors such as interactive learning, speaking–auditory communication, learners participation in class activities, and learners ability, teacher-related factors such as teacher empowerment, needs assessment, and communicative language training are essential elements that play distinct roles in the development of CLT practices in the EFL classroom.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study was an attempt to extend the domain of CLT to the Iranian classroom context, relying on the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners. To do so, the researchers conducted a grounded theory study, which resulted in a core category: *CLT practices in the EFL classroom*.

The findings of the present study could contribute to the body of knowledge, particularly in the domain of CLT practice. The findings have some implications for EFL teachers, learners, and researchers. EFL teachers can employ the sub-themes highlighted in the *needs assessment* component of the CLT model and provide their learners with activities and tasks that meet their real needs. In addition, with respect to *learners' participation in class activities* as another significant component of the CLT practice model, EFL teachers can provide their learners with opportunities for classroom participation, making them more willing to participate in communicative activities in English in the classroom context. Moreover, the findings of this study imply that EFL teachers should pay more attention to the learner-oriented activities in the EFL classroom, try to connect classroom activities to the real lives of learners, and help them expand their worldviews through meaningful and purposeful activities. Teachers should also apply teaching strategies appropriate for different learners to facilitate the learning process.

Moreover, with respect to *teacher empowerment* as one of the components of CLT practice in the EFL classroom, teachers can work on their

professional development, expand their interest in job satisfaction as CLT teachers, and seek more support for their teaching practices in the classroom context. In addition, EFL teachers employing CLT can provide corrective feedback (CF) more effectively by fine-tuning learners' mistakes.

Similarly, EFL learners can focus on the components of the CLT practice presented in the study and learn how to improve communicative and learning strategies concerning different dimensions of CLT practices in the EFL context. For instance, they can enhance their learning with respect to expanding their communicative competence, learn from their peers through interaction and *interactive learning*, and focus on different dimensions of *learners ability* in CLT, such as gaining relative mastery over comprehension skills, making use of instructional strategies, understanding the target language culture, developing high self-confidence, and acquiring the ability to speak in different situations. Moreover, they can learn how to enhance their speaking and auditory communication by paying attention to listening skills, strengthening their speaking skills, and focusing on the interaction process, which can significantly impact the mastery and fluency of speech among EFL learners.

Materials developers can benefit from the findings of the present study by considering learners' needs when designing different materials, especially speaking and listening materials, which directly impact the communication skills and communicative ability of L2 learners. Moreover, the results of this study provide teacher educators with well-designed CLT practice principles enabling them to guide teachers in selecting the most appropriate CLT practices for the EFL classroom.

The present study relied on EFL learners' perspectives on CLT practices in the EFL context. Future studies could focus on the views of EFL teachers and researchers regarding their experiences with CLT practices and their strategies for teaching communicative skills to Iranian EFL learners. This would help determine whether the views of researchers themselves differ in terms of their knowledge and practices of CLT in the classroom. Additionally, due to time constraints, this study assessed only the views of EFL learners in

language institutes in the city of Khoy, Iran. It did not include other cities or provinces. Future research could replicate this study in other educational settings in Iran or abroad.

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