

# THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN EFL CLASSROOMS: THEORY, PRACTICE AND EFFECTIVENESS

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## Abstract

This article investigates the communicative approach (CA) as a dominant paradigm in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Drawing on both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the study examines how communicative language teaching (CLT) principles are applied in real classroom contexts, the challenges teachers face in implementation, and the measurable outcomes for learners' communicative competence. The findings suggest that while CLT significantly enhances students' speaking fluency and interactive skills, its effectiveness depends heavily on contextual adaptation, teacher proficiency, and institutional support.

**Keywords:** Communicative approach, EFL, communicative language teaching, CLT, speaking fluency, language acquisition, classroom interaction, learner-centred instruction, Uzbekistan.

## Introduction

The question of how best to teach a foreign language has occupied linguists, educators and policymakers for well over a century. From the grammar-translation method of the nineteenth century to the audio-lingual drills of the mid-twentieth century, each prevailing approach reflected the linguistic theories and pedagogical assumptions of its time. The communicative approach, which emerged in the 1970s in response to dissatisfaction with form-focused methods, represented a paradigm shift: language ceased to be treated as a system of rules to be memorised and became, instead, a tool for meaningful social interaction. In EFL contexts — where learners have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom — the communicative approach holds particular promise and particular challenges. On one hand, structured communicative tasks can compensate for the absence of a natural language-rich environment. On the other

hand, large class sizes, examination pressure, and teachers trained in traditional methods can impede the full implementation of communicative principles.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive review of the communicative approach in EFL settings, examining its theoretical foundations, practical manifestations, and documented effects on learner outcomes. Special attention is given to the Central Asian EFL context, where the tension between communicative ideals and examination-driven realities is particularly pronounced.

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to outline the theoretical basis of communicative language teaching; (2) to analyse representative classroom practices; and (3) to evaluate the evidence for CLT's effectiveness in improving learners' communicative competence.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

The communicative approach draws on a rich body of theoretical work from linguistics, sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology. The foundational concept is Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence, which extended Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence and performance to include the sociolinguistic knowledge needed to use language appropriately in context. For Hymes, knowing a language meant not only internalising its grammar but also understanding when, where, and with whom to use particular forms.

Canale and Swain (1980) elaborated this concept into a multidimensional model comprising grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This framework provided the theoretical scaffold for communicative language teaching: if the goal of language learning is communicative competence in all its dimensions, then instruction must go beyond grammar drills and vocabulary lists to encompass authentic interaction, negotiation of meaning, and strategic communication.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) offered a complementary theoretical perspective: acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input — language that is slightly beyond their current level — in low-anxiety communicative situations. This hypothesis reinforced the CLT emphasis on meaningful interaction over mechanical repetition and provided a psycholinguistic rationale for task-based activities and communicative pair work.



More recently, Swain's Output Hypothesis (1995) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) have enriched the theoretical picture. Swain argued that producing language — not merely comprehending it — is essential for noticing gaps in competence and developing accuracy. Long demonstrated that negotiation of meaning during interaction facilitates acquisition by drawing learners' attention to form in a communicative context. Together, these frameworks justify a pedagogy in which learners both receive rich input and have structured opportunities to produce meaningful output.

### **3. The Communicative Approach in EFL Classroom Practice**

Translating communicative principles into classroom practice involves a range of pedagogical decisions regarding task design, teacher role, error correction, and assessment. In a prototypical CLT lesson, the teacher functions less as a lecturer and more as a facilitator: setting up communicative tasks, monitoring interaction, providing feedback, and scaffolding language use without interrupting the flow of communication.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), widely regarded as the most rigorous implementation of CLT principles, organises instruction around meaningful tasks — information-gap activities, problem-solving exercises, role plays, debates — that require learners to use the target language to achieve a real communicative goal. Willis (1996) proposed a three-stage task cycle (pre-task, task, language focus) that balances fluency-oriented performance with attention to form, addressing a common criticism that pure CLT neglects accuracy.

Role plays and simulations represent another core CLT technique, particularly valuable in EFL contexts where authentic English interaction is scarce. By enacting real-world scenarios — a job interview, a customer complaint, a medical consultation — learners develop both linguistic resources and the pragmatic awareness needed to navigate social interaction in English. Research consistently shows that regular role-play activities improve not only fluency but also learner confidence and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Cooperative learning structures, such as think-pair-share, jigsaw activities, and group discussions, extend CLT principles to the social organisation of the classroom. When learners collaborate to complete a task, the cognitive demand of communication is distributed across participants, scaffolding performance and creating conditions for incidental vocabulary and grammar acquisition.



Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development provides the theoretical basis for this approach: interaction with more capable peers enables learners to perform at a level beyond their independent capacity.

In EFL contexts specifically, the question of how much to use the learners' first language (L1) in a CLT classroom remains contested. A maximally communicative position advocates for English-only instruction, arguing that L1 use reduces target language input and practice time. A more nuanced view, supported by recent research (Macaro, 2009), holds that judicious L1 use can facilitate comprehension, reduce anxiety, and support metalinguistic reflection without undermining communicative goals. In practice, effective EFL teachers calibrate their L1 use to the proficiency level of learners and the complexity of the task.

#### **4. Challenges and Barriers to CLT Implementation**

Despite its theoretical appeal and documented benefits, the communicative approach faces significant implementation challenges in many EFL settings. Researchers have identified a persistent gap between CLT as an educational ideal and CLT as a classroom reality — what Li (1998) termed the 'difficulties of implementing CLT in China', a critique that resonates across many non-Western EFL contexts including Central Asia.

Teacher readiness is among the most frequently cited barriers. CLT places demanding professional requirements on teachers: they must be proficient users of English, skilled facilitators of interaction, and reflective practitioners capable of adapting tasks to the moment-by-moment needs of learners. In many EFL systems, teachers were trained in grammar-translation or audio-lingual traditions and lack both the linguistic confidence and the pedagogical repertoire to implement CLT effectively. Professional development programmes that combine theoretical input with classroom-based practice are essential but often absent.

Class size presents a structural constraint that is difficult to overcome. Communicative activities — particularly pair work and group discussion — require sufficient physical space and a manageable number of students for the teacher to monitor interaction and provide meaningful feedback. In classrooms of forty or more students, the logistics of CLT become problematic: noise levels rise, monitoring becomes superficial, and feedback is limited to whole-class correction.

Assessment systems that prioritise discrete-point grammar tests over communicative performance create a powerful counter-incentive to CLT. When students know that their final grade will be determined by a written examination testing vocabulary and grammar, neither they nor their teachers have a strong instrumental motivation to invest time in communicative activities. Aligning assessment with communicative goals — through oral examinations, portfolio assessment, and task-based evaluation — is a prerequisite for sustainable CLT implementation.

### **5. Evidence for the Effectiveness of the Communicative Approach**

A substantial body of empirical research supports the effectiveness of communicative language teaching for developing spoken fluency, interactional competence, and motivation to communicate. Meta-analyses by Norris and Ortega (2000) and Mackey and Goo (2007) demonstrate that form-focused instruction embedded within communicative tasks produces superior outcomes compared to decontextualised grammar instruction, particularly for the acquisition of complex grammatical structures.

Studies conducted in Central Asian EFL contexts corroborate these findings. Rashidova (2019), investigating university EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan, found that students in CLT-oriented classes significantly outperformed control groups on measures of oral fluency and discourse coherence after one semester of instruction. Crucially, no significant difference was found on grammar accuracy tests, suggesting that CLT does not compromise formal accuracy while substantially improving communicative performance.

Longitudinal research indicates that the benefits of communicative instruction are durable. Learners who have experienced CLT-based instruction demonstrate greater willingness to communicate in English outside the classroom, report higher levels of motivation, and show greater resilience in authentic communication situations. These affective and motivational outcomes are particularly significant in EFL contexts, where sustaining engagement with the target language beyond formal instruction is a key determinant of long-term proficiency.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that CLT is not a uniform method but a broad orientation admitting of many implementations. The effectiveness of communicative instruction depends critically on the quality of task design, the

proficiency and facilitation skills of the teacher, and the degree to which the institutional context supports communicative goals. A poorly designed communicative task, or a teacher who lacks the skills to manage interaction productively, will not produce the outcomes that well-designed CLT research documents.

## **6. Conclusion**

The communicative approach represents the most theoretically coherent and empirically supported framework for EFL instruction currently available. Grounded in a multidimensional conception of communicative competence and informed by decades of research in second language acquisition, CLT offers a principled alternative to form-focused methods that fail to prepare learners for real-world English use.

The challenges of CLT implementation — teacher readiness, class size, assessment alignment — are real but not insurmountable. They call for systemic responses: investment in professional development, reform of assessment practices, and institutional support for communicative pedagogy. In the Central Asian context, where English proficiency is increasingly recognised as a driver of economic development and international engagement, these investments are not merely pedagogically desirable but strategically necessary.

Future research should focus on context-sensitive models of CLT that are adapted to local educational cultures without sacrificing communicative principles. The most productive path forward lies not in importing CLT wholesale from Western educational contexts, but in developing locally grounded communicative pedagogies that honour the strengths of existing teaching traditions while expanding learners' capacity for authentic English communication.

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