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Chinese Teachers' Perceptions on Implementation of CLT in College Business English Class

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates teachers' perceptions and challenges of the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching. The participants were nine Business English teachers at a private college in Chengdu, China. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the majority of participants have favourable perceptions of CLT. However, participants mentioned teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, and policy-related challenges that hinder their implementation of CLT in Business English classes. The findings of this study are beneficial to the field of CLT in China, especially in the English for Specific Purpose context. The recommendations for future studies are discussed.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching; Business English; Teacher's Perception; Challenge

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1.0 Introduction

The launch of "The Belt and Road" in 2013 has dramatically improved international trade between China and other countries and raised an increasing demand for qualified business talent who possess good English competence, as English is the "lingua franca" in international business. Having excellent English competence can significantly enhance the competitiveness of Business English graduates because English communicative competence is the most emphasised skill by international trade companies (Shi & Cheng, 2019).

In the 1970s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was established in Europe. It can be seen as a response to traditional language teaching approaches such as the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). According to the theory of CLT, the focus of language learning and teaching in the classroom has shifted from teachers to students. However, the Chinese Confucian culture has shaped the teacher-centred teaching and learning style in English classrooms in China (Han, 2022). In the traditional English classroom, teachers are seen as authorities and are anticipated to possess knowledgeable information to teach students who passively listen to teachers without asking questions. In the CLT classroom, teachers' roles are more like facilitators or organisers; in other words, teachers are expected to create an authentic environment for students to complete diverse group activities in the target language. Students share their ideas and knowledge; in this way, they actively construct knowledge.

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1.1 Statement of Problem

Previous studies have discussed the advantages of implementing CLT in English classes. According to Eisenring and Margana (2019), since CLT highlights the role of students in language learning, it provides more opportunities for learners to practice the target language. Additionally, language teaching and learning in the CLT classroom is no longer focused on grammar and the use of the first language to translate but on using the target language and the interaction among students and teachers (Otajonova, 2022). Despite the advantages of CLT, studies also identified diverse factors, such as a lack of authentic materials (Abdullah, 2015) and a grammar-oriented educational system (Asaad, 2019), that hinder the implementation of CLT in many Asian countries.

In 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) released College English Curriculum Requirements. It carried out the curriculum reform to support the implementation of CLT to improve Chinese students' English communicative competence. Doeur (2022) investigated the effect of teachers' attitudes and beliefs on their actual performance of CLT and found that teachers' attitudes and beliefs significantly affect teachers' implementation of CLT. According to Doeur (2022), it is essential to investigate teachers' attitudes, thoughts, ideas, and behaviours. Yet, minimal research has been done on investigating the implementation of CLT in Business English classes.

To bridge this gap, the researcher has several reasons to conduct the current study in China. First, since student-centred is one of the primary elements of CLT and the Chinese MOE assigned this approach to all EFL teachers in China, by conducting this study, the research can understand whether CLT is appropriate in the Chinese context, which has a different language and cultural background.

The second reason is that CLT emphasises improving students' English communicative competence, which can boost Chinese society to be more competitive in international trade as the world's second-largest economic entity. The third reason is that it is necessary to investigate the suitability of CLT in the Chinese educational system, which has been grammar-oriented for a long time.

1.2 Objective of the Study

In the current study, the teachers' perceptions are investigated based on the principles of CLT and the challenges that teachers encountered in implementing CLT. The research objectives of the current study are presented as follows:

RO 1: To investigate the Chinese Business English teachers' perceptions towards implementing CLT in Business English classes.

RO 2: To identify the challenges that Chinese Business English teachers encountered when implementing CLT in Business English classes.

2.0 Literature Review

In this section, the theory of CLT and the previous studies on teachers' perceptions of CLT will be presented.

2.1 Communicative Language Teaching

CLT is a widely used language teaching approach that aims to improve learners' communicative competence through interactions among students and instructors. Based on the theory of CLT, the teacher's role is to provide students with meaningful communicative activities. Unlike GTM, students become the centre of the CLT classroom and are encouraged to interact effectively with the teacher to practice the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Therefore, the students must decide what, how, and where to learn and possess a positive learning attitude and self-discipline.

CLT advocates creating an authentic learning environment for students; thus, teachers should use as many authentic materials as possible, such as billboards, images, and videos (Asnawi et al., 2017). Studies have proven that using authentic materials positively improves students' English writing ability (Pratiwi & Rohayati, 2023). Furthermore, correctly applying authentic materials can enhance students' motivation and logical skills and reduce learning anxiety (Joraboyev, 2021).

In the CLT classroom, teachers are expected to teach grammar implicitly. Sato and Oyanedel (2019) believe that CLT enables students to gain grammar rules through relevant collaborations and interactions. It is important to understand teachers' perceptions of grammar to successfully teach grammar, as their teaching practice mainly aligns with their self-reflection and skills.

Error correction is vital to improve a learner's understanding of the target language; usually, the teacher corrects learners' errors because learners always lack this ability. Since CLT emphasises students' fluency over accuracy, as long as students' errors do not affect the meaning of the conversation, there is no need to correct the errors made by students. According to Al-khresheh and Orak (2021), the immediate correction of students' errors may strike down students' learning motivation. On the contrary, Zulfikar (2022) found that selectively correcting students' errors can effectively decrease students' learning anxiety.

2.2 Teachers' Perceptions Towards CLT

CLT has been widely used in the EFL classroom, and many studies have pointed out the teachers' favourable perceptions of CLT. Christianto (2019) interviewed five English teachers to investigate their perceptions of implementing CLT in one educational institution. The findings found that all teachers possess positive perceptions of CLT. Students' low English proficiency and motivation, unsuitable textbooks, and the large class size were the key challenges teachers encountered in implementing CLT. Qureshi et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study investigating 200 English teachers' perceptions of CLT in teaching English grammar. The findings reflected that almost 80% of participants advocated that English grammar should be guided by CLT.

However, studies also found unfavourable perceptions of CLT among English teachers. Lee (2014) examined 37 Korean teachers' perceptions of CLT at the K-12 level. The study results showed that Korean teachers had misunderstood the principle of CLT, which

only focuses on improving students' speaking abilities. In another study, Zulu (2019) found that Zambian secondary English teachers have a misunderstanding of the principles of CLT, and the majority of the teachers do not appreciate CLT as they think it is not suitable for students to prepare for exams and it is time-consuming to organise various group activities. Furthermore, studies have identified some challenges, such as lack of CLT-related in-service training, exam-oriented learning and teaching norms, students' low English proficiency, lack of motivation and confidence, and preference for a passive learning style, large class size, unsuitable textbooks and facilities hinder the successful implementation of CLT in the EFL context (Noori, 2018; Yoon & Yoo, 2019; Lee & Davis, 2020; Yoshihara et al., 2020; Hassan & Gao, 2021; Takal et al., 2021).

3.0 Methodology

The current study applied a qualitative research design to investigate Chinese Business English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of CLT and the challenges they encountered in implementing CLT in Business English classes. All interviews were semi-structured interviews and conducted online. The researcher developed some open-ended questions for the participants. To ensure the validity of the interview, the researcher asked one expert to check all interview questions to ensure all participants could understand what was asked. To ensure the efficiency of the discussion, the interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded upon the participants' approval, and each participant was interviewed for 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. All transcripts were shown to participants to enhance their reliability.

The current study's participants were nine teachers who teach Business English at a private college in Chengdu, China. The researcher applied the purposive sampling method to select the participants. Their demographic information is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

No.	Gender	Age	Educational Background (Bachelor)	Educational Background (Master)	Teaching Experience (year)
Teacher 1	Male	25	Business English	Translation	1
Teacher 2	Female	26	Business English	Applied Linguistics	1
Teacher 3	Female	24	Business English	Translation	0.5
Teacher 4	Female	46	English Language Literature	Teaching English as a Foreign Language	23
Teacher 5	Female	26	Business English	Applied Linguistics	2
Teacher 6	Male	29	Business English	Translation	5
Teacher 7	Female	24	Business English	Subject Teaching in English	1
Teacher 8	Female	43	English Language Literature	International Logistics Management	19
Teacher 9	Female	27	Business English	Subject Teaching in English	2

In the current study, two participants were male, and the rest were female. Their ages ranged from 24 to 46. In terms of their academic background, seven participants possessed a bachelor's degree in Business English, and the other two had a bachelor's degree in English Language Literature. The master's degrees of the participants were mainly in translation, applied linguistics, and subject teaching in English. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 months to 23 years.

4.0 Findings

In this section, the findings of the thematic analysis will be presented to address the research objectives of the current study.

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions Towards CLT

When the researcher asked the participants about their perceptions towards CLT, all participants expressed favourable perceptions towards the principles of CLT. They believed CLT could improve students' communicative competence through various group activities. For example, T1 indicated:

"I think CLT is an effective teaching approach, and I favour using it in my class. It enables students to express their ideas confidently, and teachers do not interrupt students. It also integrates with the corresponding context, which makes students' learning and memory more profound."

T2 explained the reason why she likes CLT:

"First, CLT emphasises active learning among students, which can improve students' learning enthusiasm. Next, CLT may create more learning environments, such as activities that benefit students' learning interests. Furthermore, CLT focuses more on the use of language than merely the knowledge in the textbooks."

In addition, T8 concluded that:

"CLT is useful because students can learn language knowledge and communicative skills through communications and interactions."

Regarding grammar teaching, four participants indicated that they preferred the implicit method. For example, T9 mentioned that:

"...Implicit grammar teaching combines form, function, and meaning. Therefore, it can effectively improve students' communicative competence and ability and boost their learning motivation."

Three participants said they would combine implicit and explicit methods in grammar teaching, and two claimed they preferred the

explicit method. T1 explained the reason why he likes the explicit approach as follows:

"...Students are unable to find the grammatical rule if I teach them implicitly; however, if I teach them explicitly, they would clearly understand and master grammatical rules."

In terms of error correction, six participants indicated they implicitly corrected students' errors. Two participants claimed they used explicit and implicit methods, and only T1 merely used the explicit approach to correct students' errors.

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4.2 Challenges of Implementation of CLT

Though the teachers expressed positive perceptions towards CLT, many challenges hinder the implementation of CLT in Business English classes. Based on the thematic analysis, the main challenges can be divided into teacher, student, and policy-related challenges.

4.2.1 Teacher-related Challenges

The findings of the interviews indicated that the two primary challenges teachers encountered were a lack of knowledge and skills and a lack of English proficiency.

a) Lack of Knowledge and Skills

Six teachers claimed that they lacked the knowledge and skills to implement CLT. They may feel confused when implementing CLT and wonder whether they are doing it correctly. For example, T3 concluded that:

"It requires some teaching abilities in CLT classroom; however, so far, I have minimal experience using CLT."

b) Lack of English Proficiency

In addition, teachers' lack of English proficiency is another frequently mentioned challenge. T9 said that she does not have experience learning abroad and is worried about her English proficiency.

"I think my English proficiency is not good enough to handle CLT because it requires teachers' English proficiency, which is as good as that of a native speaker."

4.2.2 Student-related Challenges

This section displays the challenges associated with students: a lack of English proficiency, a preference for a passive learning style, and a lack of learning motivation and confidence.

a) Lack of English Proficiency

Five teachers indicated that the student's English proficiency is not good, and they can hardly understand teachers' instructions. Two teachers stated that there is a considerable distinction in English proficiency among students, which makes it hard to implement CLT in their classes. For example, as mentioned by T5:

"Sometimes, students do not understand what I am talking about in class, and it is not because of my pronunciation; it is because they do not understand the meaning of some words."

b) Preference for Passive Learning Style

Another big challenge mentioned by five participants is that students prefer a passive learning style. Teachers highlighted that students get used to the teacher-centred teaching style and have trouble transforming from a teacher-centred class to a student-centred class. For instance, T3 described his idea as follows:

"Students like the traditional teaching method, I mean, spoon-feed education style; they like to quietly listen to the teachers and do whatever teachers ask them to."

c) Lack of Learning Motivation and Confidence.

Three participants mentioned that students always feel shy about speaking English in class, which hinders the practice of the target language. Sometimes, students have no motivation or self-learning abilities. As T3 mentioned below:

"...When students speak English in class, they are scared of making mistakes; they think other students may laugh at them, which makes them feel embarrassed, and some other students are too shy to speak English in class."

T6 indicated that:

"I teach like a monkey on the stage; they just respond to me with nods, or sometimes after I teach, they just respond to me with 'ah' or 'yes'. I got no response from them."

4.2.3 Policy-related Challenges

In this section, the participants expressed their thoughts on challenges regarding the educational policy. Four significant challenges were identified in the interviews: large class sizes, inappropriate textbooks, unsatisfactory facilities, and lack of in-service training.

a) Large Class Size

Six teachers claimed that class size is the biggest challenge. Thus, not every student can have the opportunity to practice in class, and this may affect students' learning enthusiasm. As T1 indicated:

"There are too many students, and only a part of them participated in the activities and practised their communicative competence; this may cause boredom for those who did not participate in the communicative activities."

b) Inappropriate Textbook

Seven teachers complained that the assigned books are not suitable for implementing CLT in class. First, the contents of assigned textbooks are too hard for students. Next, the books are more exam-oriented and lack authentic content and communicative activities. Therefore, teachers have to spend more time developing teaching materials for class. T6 commented on the textbook as below:

"Honestly, the textbook is inappropriate because the activities are more task-based and teacher-centred, such as fill-in-the-blanks, questions and answers, and lack of communicative activities."

c) Unsatisfactory Facility

Six teachers complained about the teaching facilities. They mentioned that the lack of moveable tables hinders teachers from organising group activities. Also, teachers commented that the computer lab, projector, and software are too outdated. For example, T3 indicated:

"I think the teaching facilities are incomplete; for example, we have a multimedia classroom, but there is only one blackboard and a projector; there is no multimedia at all."

d) Lack of In-Service Training

All participants affirmed that in-service training is beneficial for improving their teaching effectiveness. Though all teachers admitted that they had attended in-service training, the training programs were mainly not CLT-related; the in-service training was more focused on curriculum ideology and politics, project application, paper publication, some specific textbooks, and forums. Moreover, most in-service training was conducted online. For example, T9 commented:

"I attended some in-service training. They were mostly conducted online. For example, I attended an online seminar about a newly published textbook, Understanding Contemporary China."

5.0 Discussion

The findings of the interviews revealed the fact that the majority of teachers possess positive perceptions that are in line with the principles of CLT. These Business English teachers believe CLT can improve students' communicative competence. Teachers understand the importance of giving students opportunities to practice English in various group activities. Moreover, most teachers used implicit error correction and implicit grammar teaching tactics. However, some teachers still think grammar is essential and must be taught explicitly because students must pass the exam and pursue a certificate. This finding aligns with the research by Yoon and Yoo (2019), which found that exam-oriented learning and teaching norms are the biggest obstacles to applying CLT in Korea.

Through the interviews, many challenges were identified that impeded teachers' efforts to implement CLT in Business English classes. Many teachers indicated a lack of knowledge and skills to implement CLT. This is because most of them were new teachers with minimal teaching experience. Another important reason is that teachers lack CLT-related in-service training. Furthermore, students' low English proficiency, lack of motivation and confidence, and preference for a passive learning style also affect teachers' endeavours to organise communicative activities. This finding echoes previous studies such as Noori (2018), Yoshihara et al. (2020), and Takal et al. (2021). Additionally, teachers complained that there were too many students in the class, and this finding is in line with the study conducted by Lee and Davis (2020), which highlighted this issue in Korea. Inappropriate textbooks and unsatisfactory facilities were also identified as the main challenges, which confirmed previous studies by Hassan and Gao (2021).

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of CLT and their challenges in implementing CLT in Business English classes. The findings revealed that most teachers possessed positive perceptions regarding the principles of CLT. They highly advocated the effectiveness of CLT in improving students' communicative competence. Furthermore, based on the interview findings, the researcher identified many challenges, namely teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, and policy-related challenges, that hinder teachers' successful implementation of CLT in Business English classes.

Several actions should be taken to ensure the successful implementation of CLT in Business English classes in China. It is suggested that more CLT-related in-service training be provided to teachers to improve their skills in the implementation of CLT and their understanding of the principles of CLT. Next, more authentic content and communicative activities should be incorporated into the

textbooks. Furthermore, reducing the number of students in each class is necessary. Additionally, the administration should provide more support in purchasing moveable chairs and desks to facilitate the organisation of group activities. The current study has two major limitations. First, the participants were selected from one college. Second, the data were only collected through interviews with teachers. Future studies should enlarge the sample size, observe teachers' practice in class, and investigate Business English students' perceptions of CLT.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The findings of this study are beneficial to the field of CLT in China, especially in the English for Specific Purpose context.

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